





BOSTON UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL

Dissertation

THE THOUGHT IN ROBERT FROST'S POETRY

by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

1947



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## INTRODUCTION

I love to toy with the Platonic notion  
That wisdom need not be of Athens Attic,  
But well may be Laconic, even Boeotian.  
At least I will not have it systematic. <sup>1</sup>

Robert Frost, with his characteristic elfin humor, thus throws down the gauntlet to organized scholarship. He openly admits his philosophy is not systematized, and challenges the critics to discover the over-all pattern of his thinking. Accepting the challenge, the author of this dissertation will attempt to marshall Mr. Frost's innumerable flashes of intuitive wisdom into orderly categories for the purpose of examining and evaluating them. Sunbeams shining naturally and undesignedly in the New Hampshire hills lack the power of their sisters which, when focalized through a prism, release amazing, new power and light. The object here is to centralize Mr. Frost's thinking so that his hitherto unrelated thoughts may combine to concentratedly illuminate for all mankind his answers to the eternal problems of man and his world.

Because every man has to face and solve the basic problems of life, he is particularly eager to examine another's solution. As Kant remarks: "Philosophy can never be learned, save historically;..at most, we can but learn to philosophize." Though the modest Frost would shrink, says Professor Gerald W. Brace, from calling his

1. Frost, A Witness Tree, p.70





way of looking quizzically at life "philosophy", nonetheless, this poet has wrestled with the "sorry scheme of things entire", and his conclusions should be surveyed. Since scholars deal primarily in the coin of system with arbitrarily accepted phraseology, this investigation will not appeal to those of Frost's temperament. He himself has aptly characterized the opponents:

Scholars and artists thrown together are often annoyed at the puzzle of where they differ. Both work from knowledge; but I suspect they differ most importantly in the way their knowledge is come by. Scholars get theirs with conscientious thoroughness along projected lines of logic; poets theirs cavalierly and as it happens in and out of books.<sup>2</sup>

To outline, then, the "projected lines of logic": first, the aim of order. Mr. Frost's positive and negative attitudes will be aligned in a hierarchy of significance. For whether he desires it or no, his thoughts can be systematized. When he is caught like his poor butterfly, he may not be as breath-takingly lovely as when unconfined. Unfortunately, logic mints thoughts into prosaic coins for the scholarly world with no regard for transient color and wonder. The loss of beauty is counterbalanced by the easy negotiability of seasoned reason.

Second: the areas for consideration will be (I) Man; (II) Man and Nature; (III) Man and Society; (IV) Man and Reason; (V) Man and Emotion; (VI) Man and God. When

<sup>2</sup> Frost, The Figure a Poem Makes, introduction to Collected Poems of Robert Frost.



the evidence is assembled, it will be evaluated; its merits and defects examined. The final result will be a succinct summary of this New England poet-thinker's wisdom, gleaned over the years, "cavalierly and as it happens in and out of books." And though it may seem much like the small boy's gift of roller skates to his grandmother for Christmas, to prepare a paper of this sort for one who "will not have it systematic", the aim is a tribute to the genius of Robert Frost.

Since 1914, when "A Boy's Will" was published in London, Robert Frost has been in the public eye. Although he was 37 when he first attracted critical attention, neglect has been absent in his last 34 years. Amy Lowell was one of the first to recognize him enthusiastically:

Mr. Frost's work is undoubtedly more finished in its kind than the work of any other living American.... in Mr. Frost, we find achievement.<sup>3</sup>

The perspicacious William Dean Howells hailed him from "The Editor's Easy Chair" in 1915.<sup>4</sup> Ezra Pound added his paeon in Poetry: A Magazine of Verse.<sup>5</sup> A minute examination of the four-score reviews and articles of the past quarter-century reveals little material significant to

<sup>3</sup> Lowell, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry, p.135

<sup>4</sup> Howells, Harper's Monthly Magazine, Vol.131, p.635

<sup>5</sup> Pound, Poetry, A Magazine of Verse, Vol.5, p.127



the present pursuit. Why have Mr. Frost's speaking voice, his choice of farmhouse, and even his Christmas cards been given more notice than his philosophy? His attitude toward life is sometimes mentioned in passing, but it is not the sole subject of any paper. Perhaps he himself has given a suggestion of the answer when he writes:

They cannot look out far.  
They cannot look in deep.  
But when was that ever a bar  
To any watch they keep? <sup>6</sup>

A monotonous sameness, a lack of new insight and a tendency to harrow the same ground characterizes the criticism of Frost. As early as 1925, Mr. G. R. Elliott observed:

As for reviewers...the fact is that during the past ten years the periodical critics, after too much neglecting him, have responded with a generosity far too quick and superficial. <sup>7</sup>

Because the glitter of Frost's deceptively simple rhythms have kept many from peering below for his genuine gold, he has been wronged by those who were only seeking to pay him homage. The stereotype judgment constantly appears: Frost is a poetic genius; by intricately clever, seemingly naive devices he achieves perfect effect. Variations on this theme will be aspects of his technique or his

<sup>6</sup> Frost, "~~Neither~~ Out Far Nor in Deep", Collected Poems of Robert Frost, p.394

<sup>7</sup> Elliott, The Virginia Quarterly Review, Vol. 1, p. 205





final results. These superficial evaluations of Frost have irritated both this author and Mr. Lawrance Thompson, who summarized the situation thus in 1942:

Evaluations have been general, and inevitably superficial. I believe that "Fire and Ice" is the first published attempt to offer a detailed consideration of those aims and accomplishments which find integrated expression within the poetry of Robert Frost. <sup>8</sup>

This scholar feels quite rightly that Mr. Frost deserves the quiet deep study which he, in turn, has painstakingly given to his craft. Mr. Thompson has responded to the quality of Frost's poetry by producing a definitive volume in a manner worthy of this four-time Pulitzer Prize poet of New Hampshire. In all the Frostiana, this is one of the two books meritorious enough to escape the epithet "superficial", in this author's opinion.

This well-written book is divided into three sections: Poetry in Theory, in which he traces the role of poetry through the ages and the various functions it has performed; Poetry in Practice, in which he carefully analyzes Mr. Frost's productions with discernment, revealing hidden technical excellences unseen by previous critics; and third, Attitude Toward Life, in which he

Thompson, Fire and Ice, p.xi



briefly, but cogently summarizes the poet's point of view in the twentieth century. Had Mr. Thompson devoted as much space to his third topic as he did to Poetry in Theory and Practice, the purpose of this dissertation would have been fulfilled by him. Fortunately for this author, Mr. Thompson's aim was to take, as he puts it "a leisurely stroll among the poems". However, he realized that the poetic theory and practice of Frost would be inadequate without reference to the mind that produced them. So, as background material to the major portion of the book, which is more than four-fifths by volume devoted to the poetic theory and practice, Mr. Thompson has rounded out his criticism with an essay on the mind of Frost. Since it represents less than one-fifth of Fire and Ice, it is by no means an exhaustive study of Frost's philosophy. It is, however, an excellent adjunct to his poetic theory and practice, and provides a starting point for this dissertation.

Mr. Robert P. Tristram Coffin, a personal friend of Robert Frost, has written the other fine treatise worthy of the poet.<sup>10</sup> Mr. Coffin's aim was to show that a New England Renaissance has come to us in the persons

<sup>10</sup> Coffin, New Poetry of New England: Frost and Robinson.



of Robert Frost and E. A. Robinson. Mr. Coffin has had intimate contact with the two, and speaks with authority. One who understands New England, puritan New England which still exists where the old stock is entrenched, alone can appreciate completely Mr. Frost. The emphasis is, of course, on the proving of his thesis of a Renaissance, but his observations of Frost en route are those of a wise New Englander. Several of these observations will be used as signposts in this paper.

Forgetting the large body of Frostiana, not pertinent to present purposes, the present writer believes it is now time to strike out farther afield than either Fire and Ice or New Poetry of New England:Frost and Robinson have ventured. They have blazed the trail in the right direction, along what Frost called "projected lines of logic". Thompson has analyzed Frost's mind as a keen, skeptical instrument, and Coffin has drawn the New England framework in which it operates. The next step is to record the mental activities of this particular thinker.





## CHAPTER ONE

## MAN

Just specimens is all New Hampshire has,  
 One each of everything as in a showcase  
 Which naturally she doesn't care to sell. <sup>1</sup>

Individuality is the dominant note in New Hampshire. Humanity there is as characteristically stamped with it, as are the mountains, lakes and mineral deposits. The only observable conformity is unending variety. Naturally, her men are different from the assembly-line members of urban society. Unconcerned with convention, New Hampshire men turn their attentions to individual solutions of Life's enigmas, assuming their own responsibilities, and asking panaceas from no one.

This independence has won the admiration of Frost. He is a spiritual kinsman to them, although his actual birthplace was San Francisco, California. Like them, he has solved his own problems in unique ways. He has not turned to the government for help, as so many people do in a crisis. Rather, he has accepted the hard lines dealt him by Fate: the loss at ten of his adventurous, iconoclastic father; the poverty of his adolescence, sustained only by his grandfather's charity; the unfortunate

<sup>1</sup> Frost, "New Hampshire", Collected Poems of Robert Frost, p.201



combination of circumstances which forced him to withdraw from Dartmouth College in his freshman year; the neglect of his poetry by the public for twenty years. These blows never felled him. Consequently, he can truly appreciate that character which accepts what is sent, and copes with it, patiently and single-handedly. This capable type of individuality most often excites Frost's admirations. We find him extolling it, at length, in "Build Soil".

Herein, Frost only lightly disguises himself as the speaker, Tityrus, a voluble and philosophic farmer. Of course, it is not always fair to assume that every line written by a poet expresses his own convictions. In the case of a dramatic poet whose aim is to give insight into multitudinous minds, often varied and opposed, no critic has the right to attribute each and every viewpoint to the author. How often Shakespeare and Browning, for instance, have suffered from this fallacious practice. How frequently a hypothesis is stated and the poetry is misconstrued and twisted to fit the foregone conclusions. Since this seems to be an evil of which critics must beware, this author has checked the poetically expressed convictions of Mr. Frost, with his prose "Meditative Monologues" (as he calls his lectures). Substantially, every major point under



consideration here may be re-enforced by reference to statements which he makes elsewhere on his own authority. His own basic beliefs unite in the formation of a consistent pattern, which may be discovered by a comprehensive survey of his works. His own personal philosophy is so characteristically ear-marked that confusion is impossible.

Furthermore, he prides himself on the clarity with which he distinguishes the speaking voices of his characters. Once, when he was completely unknown, he sent a group of poems to a friend for criticism. Evaluation of these poems, (some of them now Frost's most famous) led the friend to remark their primary virtue lay in their conversational tone. Editors at the time were not interested in the conversation of genuine farmers, but rather in the pseudo-Arcadian drivel of shepherds that never were, on land or sea. Frost refused to turn to the contemporary style, and plotted instead to capitalize on his one outstanding quality, the Man Speaking, to turn the Emersonian phrase. Consequently, every carefully polished poem of his so painstakingly limns the separate speakers that it is impossible to confuse their attitudes. He has been equally true in stating his own point of view in various pieces, and there is no more mistaking him than, say, Brother Meserve or the Witch of Coös. Since we have his





word for it, that he is "the author of several books against the world in general", <sup>2</sup> it is no surprise to find Tityrus ironically condemning, in Frostian tones, contemporary civilization.

I bid you to a one-man revolution --  
The only revolution that is coming.<sup>3</sup>

The emphasis here is obviously on personal responsibility -- one-man responsibility -- not corporate activity. Fundamentally, individuality underlies his entire philosophy. He has only scorn for those who are, in his phrase, "too unseparate". The millenium will come when everyone says with him:

Let me be the one  
To do what is done -- <sup>4</sup>

He advocates that man break away from the entangling alliances of party, creed and society. Once free, the ideal man will quietly nurture his own resources, until he is able to produce a worthwhile contribution. If an author, he will not rush into print. If a farmer, he will not rush unseasoned fruit to market.

There is still more we never bring or should  
bring;  
More that should be kept back --  
.....though we both know poets  
Who fall all over each other to bring soil  
And even subsoil and hardpan to market. <sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p 206

<sup>3</sup> Frost, "Build Soil -- A Political Pastoral" op.cit. p.429

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.429

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.426



This shrewd ironic call to ignore the world's markets, and be first true to one's self is the keynote of Frost's ideal man.

To Basil De Selincourt, the poet seems to be saying: "Sanity begins at home. Truth lives only as the individual sees and realizes it." <sup>6</sup> Note, as the individual sees it! Frost, as an individual, proposes a "five-year plan":

You come to me and I'll unfold to you  
A five year plan I call so, not because  
It takes ten years or so to carry out,  
Rather because it took five years at least  
To think out. <sup>7</sup> .....  
.....  
Keep off each other and keep each other off.<sup>8</sup>

His proposition is that the cardinal virtue of individuality be cultivated by each sentient being, until genuine sanity is achieved, until all men discard convention, class, greed and the "thousand ills that flesh is heir to."

As Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once slyly observed: "No generalization is ever completely true, not even this one", so Frost realizes that unadulterated individuality alone will not be effective unless coupled with sincerity. He believes that significant writing must spring from "some unaccountable and personal prejudice."

<sup>6</sup> DeSelincourt, a review in The Observer.

<sup>7</sup> Frost, "Build Soil--A Political Pastoral", Collected Poems of Robert Frost, p.428

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 429



Else the writer expresses the alien prejudices of other people . He himself has been true to this "personal prejudice", as he so quaintly labels his own independent thinking. This is no pose. Sydney Cox has observed that Frost manifests "sincerity in perception, sincerity in thought, sincerity in feeling and sincerity in expression."<sup>9</sup> When Frost tells us that he thinks man is too "inter-personal", and not "personal" enough, one cannot doubt his intent nor his sincerity.

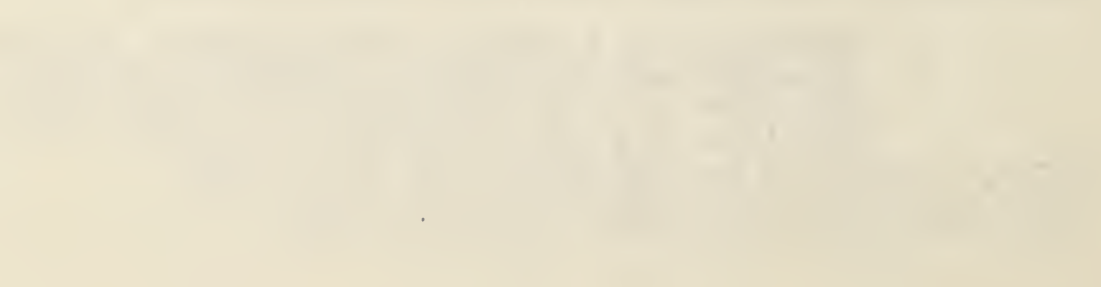
The second quality that characterizes Frost's ideal man is self-restraint. The tearing of hair and the gnashing of teeth are not for him. He bows to the inevitable, but he does not surrender his integrity in the process. By indirection, Frost expresses this in his picture of John, the upset farmer in "The Housekeeper". John's common-law wife has just deserted him, because he never legalized their relationship. His loss demoralizes him. He can no longer be dependent upon for the simplest tasks a farmer must perform. His hay has been rained on three times. Once when hoeing, his control broke:

Something went wrong. I saw him throw the hoe  
 Sky-high with both hands. I can see it now --  
 Come here -- I'll show you -- in that apple-tree.  
 That's no way for a man to do .....<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Cox, Article in New Republic, Vol. 12, p. 109

<sup>10</sup> Frost, "The Housekeeper" op cit. p. 105

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John is letting things smash, as he "sort of swears" the time away. He won't deny himself the luxury of anger. He is determined to be more beast than human.

All is, he's made up his mind not to stand  
What he has got to stand. <sup>11</sup>

The final word on John is "Dreadful fool".

For contrast, turn to "Brown's Descent or The Willy-nilly Slide". Here, indeed, is a situation provocative of blasphemy and ill-humor against the world. The two mile slide down the icy hill by the unprepared farmer would have inspired vile temper in lesser men. Not Brown. En route, he did all he could to save himself: attempted to dig his heels in, tried for footholds in the snowy slippery expanse. Naught availed.

So halfway down he fought the battle,  
Incredulous of his own bad luck.  
And then becoming reconciled  
To everything, he gave it up  
And came down like a coasting child. <sup>12</sup>

Brown bowed with grace to natural law, and then circumvented it on foot. Frost's ~~condemnation~~ of this response to difficulty is too obvious to need further notice. Self-reliance and self-restraint win his plaudits every time.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Frost, "Brown's Descent", revised version, What Cheer, edited by David McCord. p. 6



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JANUARY 1950

TO THE HONORABLE CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO  
FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF CHEMISTRY  
SUBJECT: REPORT ON THE PROGRESS OF RESEARCH  
DURING THE YEAR 1949

The Department of Chemistry has been fortunate in having a very successful year. The research program has been carried out in a most efficient manner, and the results have been of the highest quality. The following is a summary of the work done during the year 1949.

The first part of the report deals with the work of the various research groups. The second part deals with the administrative matters of the department. The third part deals with the financial matters of the department. The fourth part deals with the general progress of the department.

Still one does not need to successfully circumvent the unpleasant circumstance for Frost's admiration. Often-times, just "taking it on the chin" is all that is asked. It takes as much character to fail magnificently as to win. Job is one of Frost's favorites. Sometimes, as with Milton, Frost's ideal men only "stand and wait". But if they wait without bitterness, without cavilling against fate, they are worthy of the name of man. By self-control and constancy, one can rise above pettiness and see things aright.

Better defect almost,  
 If seen clear,  
 Than life's victories of doubt  
 That need endless talk talk      13  
 To make them out.

Self-restraint speaks for itself. Its badge of honor is inherent, but only the discerning ever seek or find it.

A self-controlled individualist will add unto himself a third quality in time. The acquisition will not be immediate, because tolerance must grow first. When it does, though, democratic friendliness will be the fruit. Frost learned this himself; when

13 Frost, "An Empty Threat", Collected Poems of Robert Frost, p. 257



he was just feeling his way along toward wisdom, he moved to New Hampshire. As his tolerance grew, and his experience widened he found that people were better than he supposed them:

I hadn't an illusion in my handbag  
About the people being better there  
Than those I left behind. And yet they were.  
14

Of course, the people weren't better or worse. It was simply his maturity that made him aware of their value. He began to cultivate human possibilities, and to develop that insight into the human heart which one must have, or be a stranger on this planet forever. Consequently, his ideal man is a friendly one. Robert Coffin says Frost cannot help attracting friends.<sup>15</sup>

In "The Tuft of Flowers", he illustrates the development of his own thought. In the morning, when he starts to mow the rest of a half-leveled field, he is, he muses:

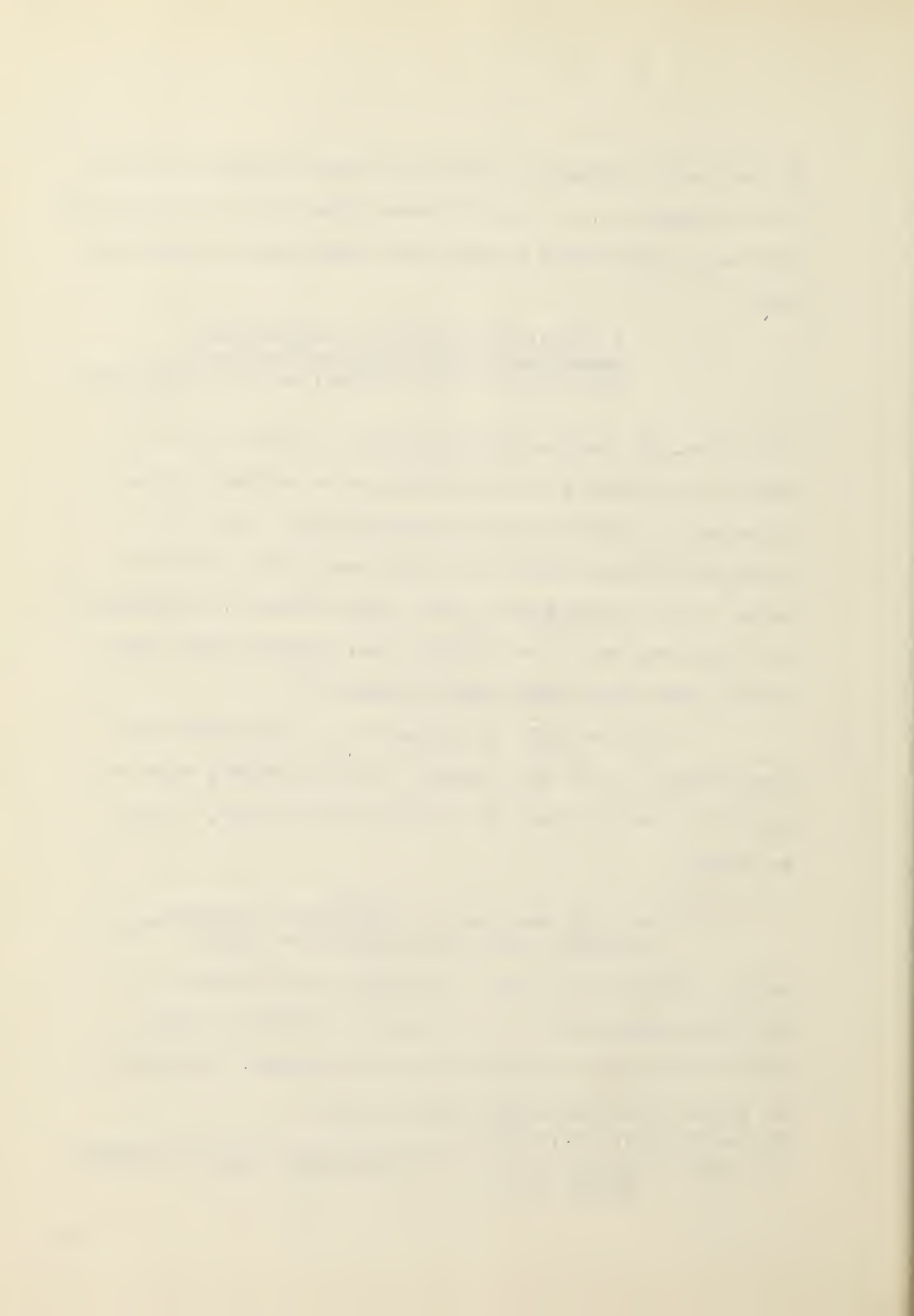
alone,  
"As all must be," I said within my heart,  
"Whether they work together or apart."<sup>16</sup>

As he continues his work, friendless and solitary, a butterfly attracts his attention to a clump of wild-flowers that the preceding mower had spared. Reflecting

<sup>14</sup> Frost, "New Hampshire" Ibid, p. 207

<sup>15</sup> Coffin, op.cit.,p.102

<sup>16</sup> Frost, "The Tuft of Flowers",Collected Poems of Robert Frost, p.31



on this, Frost realizes

"Men work together," It told him from the heart,  
 "Whether they work together or apart." 17

It is his second thought that brings him to the realization of the friendliness of fellow-travellers, on what Dickens called, "the common pathway to the grave."

Once again, sincerity must be stressed. Frost does not mean the specious type of intercourse such as the pedantic professor in "A Hundred Collars" indulges in with the peasantry.

They meet him in the general store at night,  
 Preoccupied with formidable mail,  
 Rifling a printed letter as he talks.  
 They seem afraid. He would not have it so:  
 Though a great scholar, he's a democrat,  
 If not at heart, at least on principle. 18

No, Frost means genuine interest in your fellow-man. Certainly, he has had experience with all types. He is not democratic on principle; he is inherently so. He has worked as a bobbin-boy in a Lawrence mill; and as a country school master; and as a farmer, both here and in England; and as a college professor; and as a lecturer before the most learned societies in America. He loves humanity, no matter what its garb. He is not one to check the Social Register nor Dunn & Bradstreet

17 Frost, *ibid*, p. 32

18 Frost, "A Hundred Collars" *Ibid*, p. 61





before extending the right hand of fellowship.

When a friend calls to me from the road  
 And slows his horse to a meaning walk,  
 I don't stand still and look around  
 On all the hills I haven't hoed,  
 And shout from where I am, "What is it?"  
 No, not as there is a time to talk.  
 I thrust my hoe in the mellow ground,  
 Blade-end up and five feet tall,  
 And plod: I go up to the stone wall  
 For a friendly visit. 19

Llewellyn Jones has aptly phrased it when he says  
 Frost has captured the human tone.<sup>20</sup> Yes, the humanity  
 of Frost is evident.

Snobbery he despises. He once told this author,  
 with great glee, of an occasion on which a Pullman  
 porter and he were settling the fate of the nation, late  
 one night on a train. When the porter turned to go, he  
 said to Frost: "Remember, suh, we read you; we're all be-  
 hind you." Social barriers do not exist for Frost, unless  
 it is to satirize them.

...don't you think we sometimes make too much  
 Of the old stock? What counts is the ideals.. 21

Because Frost's ideal man is an individualist, he will  
 choose his friends without kow-towing to social conven-  
 tions. Because he is self-controlled, he will be a true

19 Frost, "A Time to Talk" Ibid, p. 156

20 Jones, First Impressions, p. 222

21 Frost, "The Generations of Men" Ibid p. 101



friend, constant in sun and storm. Finally, he will be all-embracingly friendly, because experience has shown him worth abides in all men.

The ingenuity of man intrigues Frost.

Webster has defined "ingenuity", as springing from the Latin, meaning natural capacity, or a guiding and directing faculty, characterized by cleverness. Whenever this natural capacity exerts itself in the solution of a problem, it thrills Frost. At least three of his poems are strictly concerned with this attribute. The many problems that man faces are often vulnerable because of his ingenuity. True, it can degenerate into shrewd selfish bargaining or other despicable practices, but in its best state, it is inspiring.

In a particularly fine poem "On a Tree Fallen Across the Road (to Hear us Talk)", he sketches man's reaction to natural obstruction. A tempest has caused the downfall of a mighty tree. Frost cannot continue on his projected path, since he lacks the tools to remove the tree from the road. He may be unequal physically to heaving it out of his way, or to cutting through it since he has no axe at hand, but he is not conquered. His native ingenuity will come to his rescue, and he will succeed:

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We will not be put off the final goal  
 We have it hidden in us to attain,  
 Not though we have to seize earth by the pole

And, tired of aimless circling in one place,  
 Steer straight off after something into space.

22

He exults in man's power. Time and again he sings of it. In "Sand Dunes", he sees an unexpected analogy. The waves of the sea are wet and green, but the waves of the land (sand dunes) are brown and dry. The sea is man's enemy; she thinks she subdues him when she sinks a ship, or covers a hut with sand. Frost reproves this unfounded pride:

She may know cove and cape,  
 But she does not know mankind  
 If by any change of shape,  
 She hopes to cut off mind. 23

This striving refines man; helps him grow. Ludwig Lewisohn thinks that this is one of the aspects of the human drama which most appeals to Frost.<sup>24</sup> Man has a fundamental energy that cannot be permanently repressed. It will out. Its expressions are many. He delights in finding them wherever they may be. In a satiric little poem on a microscopic insect, he affirms:

I have a mind myself and recognize  
 Mind when I meet with it in any guise.  
 No one can know how glad I am to find  
 On any sheet the least display of mind.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup>Frost, "On a Tree Fallen Across the Road" Ibid, p.296

<sup>23</sup>Frost, "Sand Dunes" Ibid, p. 228 330

<sup>24</sup>Lewisohn, Expression in America, p.499





The guise may be that of a farm boy who has no ready-made games at his disposal. Ingenuity directs him to become a "Swinger of Birches".

Circumstances may momentarily stop or stun his ideal man, but inherent ingenuity will soon help him salvage something from the situation. Maybe success will not be the result, but in some way it is bound to be advantageous.

Men.....  
 ...be but more free to think  
 For the one more cast off shell. 26

The best line in which he has expressed this faith is

We have ideas yet that we haven't tried.<sup>27</sup>

Another quality of man that Frost celebrates is industriousness. No one has ever more truly lived his poetry than Frost, in this particular instance. Always he has been a hard worker. Even now, at 71, he is still active in the academic world. He is the George Ticknor Fellow in Humanities at Dartmouth College. He never was graduated from college, (although fifteen institutions have given him degrees), but it was not because of lack of application. Robert P.T. Coffin writes:

He went to a very fine college, finer even than Harvard, called life...In that institution of higher education, life, he underwent the stern disciplines of hard and tedious work. Frost learned in life the lessons of silence and independence and sincerity, and the greater lesson of joy in creating something durable out of the sight and feeling of a moment. 28

<sup>26</sup>Frost, "Sand Dunes", *Ibid*, p. 330  
<sup>27</sup>Frost, "Riders", *Ibid*, p. 345  
<sup>28</sup>Coffin, *op.cit.*, p. 92





Coffin refers to Harvard, because Frost spent two years there as an undergraduate in the 'nineties. He did not find it congenial, but it would be slander to say that he left the ivy walls for the ease of the lolling poetic life, then being made popular by "The Yellow Book" devotees. Always he has worked, and too long it was without reward. For a score of years, he earned only \$200 by his pen.<sup>29</sup> He was not idle, far from it, but a grocer once planned to appropriate his horse for an overdue food bill. When he became a farmer, it was primarily to supply his wife and four children with that which he could wrest from the soil.

He likes to work. Perhaps it would be more exact to say that he likes to work when he can unite his vocation with his avocation. For instance, farming coincides perfectly in locale and necessary equipment with botanizing, which is his hobby. Once when he was chopping wood with enthusiasm, two tramps appeared who needed his job.

The time when most I loved my task  
 These two must make me love it more  
 .....  
 My right ~~my~~ might be love but theirs was need.  
 And where the two exist in twain  
 Theirs was the better right -- agreed.

<sup>29</sup>Boynton, Literature and American Life, p. 805

The first part of the paper is devoted to a general discussion of the problem. It is shown that the problem is of great importance in the theory of the structure of the atom. The second part is devoted to a detailed discussion of the problem. It is shown that the problem is of great importance in the theory of the structure of the atom. The third part is devoted to a detailed discussion of the problem. It is shown that the problem is of great importance in the theory of the structure of the atom.

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But yield who will to their separation,  
 My object in living is to unite  
 My avocation and my vocation  
 As my two eyes make one in sight. <sup>30</sup>

But he is no dilettante, working only when the spirit moves him, and turning elsewhere when labor becomes irksome repetition. In "After Apple-picking", he has painted a picture of utter fatigue, resulting from day-long work in the orchard that has left him dog-weary.

One would completely misunderstand the type of industriousness that Frost loves, if it is confused with the end of money making. Mercenary motives are alien to his way of thinking. He thinks a farmer with an annual cash income of two hundred dollars is well-fixed to fend with Life and gain all the important victories. Because his ideal man is not a money multiplying Henry Kaiser, Frost has been judged "strangely out of touch with his times".<sup>31</sup> His gentle scorn of those who waste precious time is epitomized in this short inquiry:

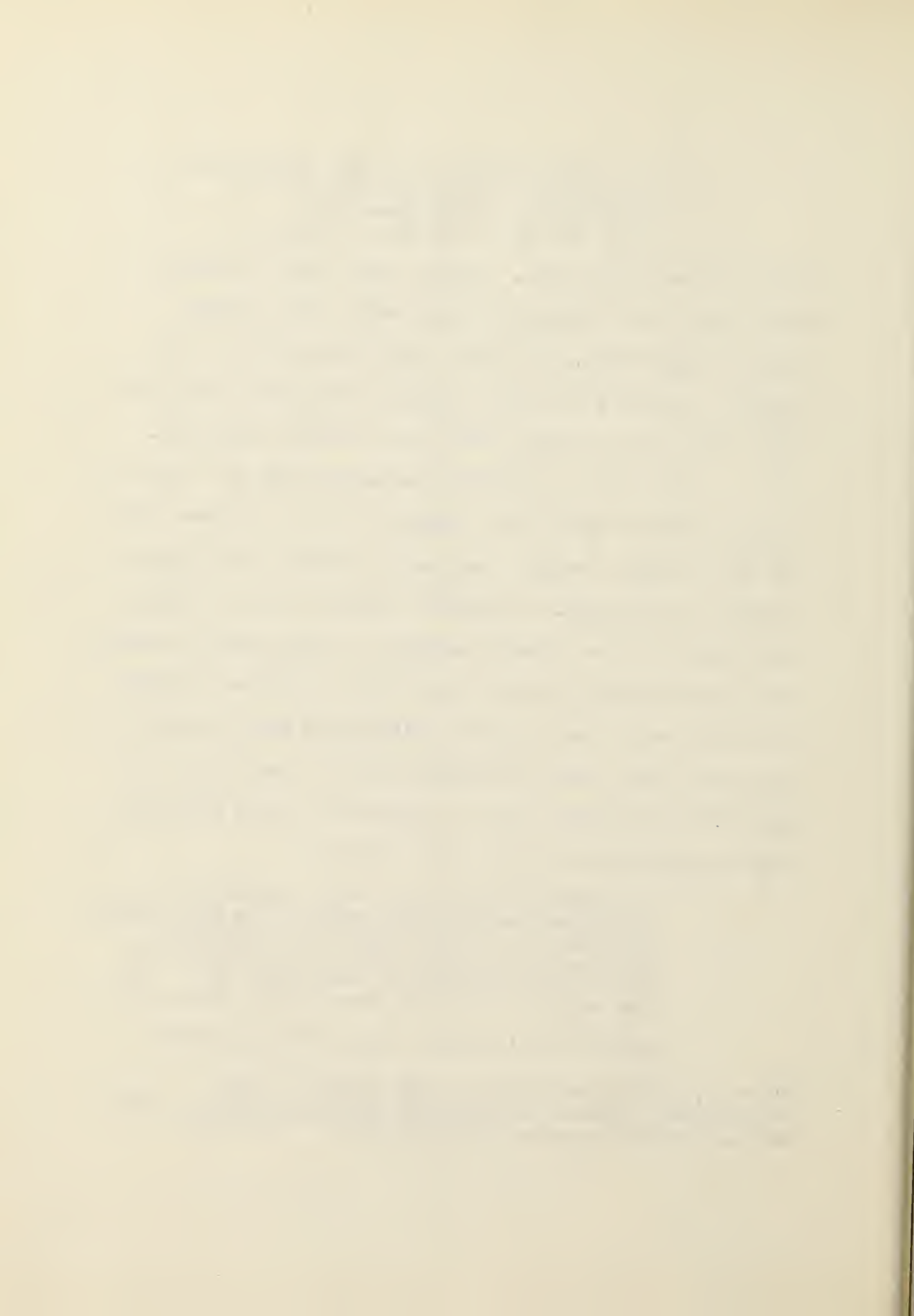
I couldn't keep from asking impolitely,  
 Where he had been and what had he been doing?  
 How did he get so? (Rich was understood).  
 In dealing in "old rags" in San Francisco.  
 Oh it was terrible as well could be.  
 We both of us turned over in our graves.<sup>32</sup>

Since Frost idealizes the self-controlled

<sup>30</sup>Frost, Ibid "Two Tramps in Mud Time" p. 359

<sup>31</sup>Schneider, quoted in Twentieth Century Authors, p.503

<sup>32</sup>Frost, "New Hampshire" Ibid,p.200



industrious individualistic type of man, it comes as no surprise that tenacity holds a high place in his favor. Keats and Shelley were famous long before they reached the age at which he first found a publisher. To keep an even keel despite the storm takes industry and self-reliance. To hold on when the odds are against you takes determination.

In "A Servant to Servants", Frost gives us a picture of a farmer who changed his residence from a spot in the back woods to one nearer a lake, not "without some sacrifice". Having changed, he pitched into his new place with all his will. The problems were many, but rather than give up, he always trusted that "one steady pull more" would see him out of difficulties. When even this hope had to be relinquished and defeat was waiting for him to surrender, Len put his shoulder to the work, and closing his eyes to the obvious, said doggedly,

...the best way out is always through.<sup>33</sup>

That's tenacity. The thought is worth repeating: the best way out is always through. No shilly-shallying; no easier alternative; no Chamberlain peace with honor. It re-echoes his wish to be the one to do what is done. He does not

<sup>33</sup>Frost, "A Servant to Servants" Ibid, p. 83

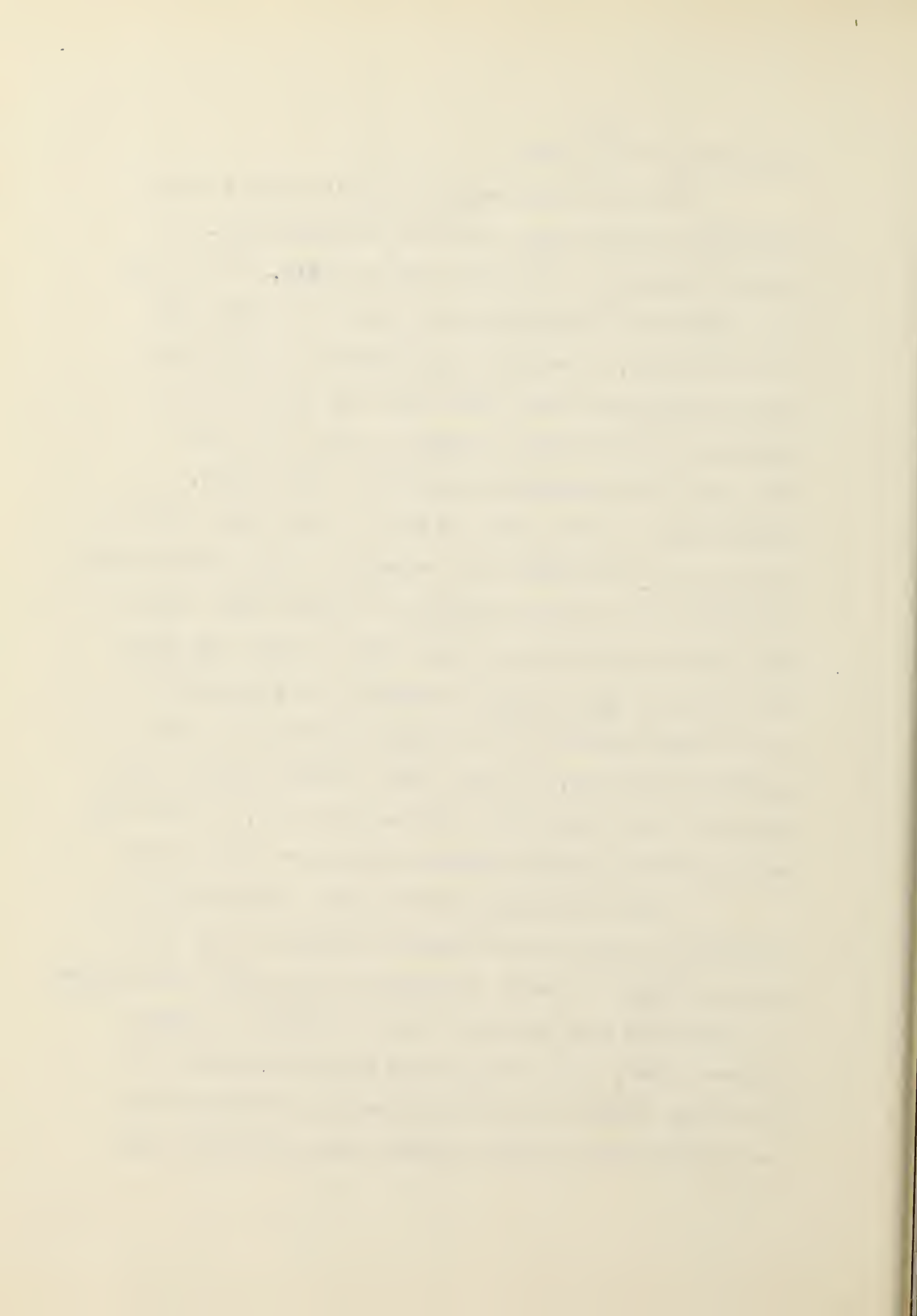




shrink from rocky paths.

Thus far, analysis of Frost's ideal man has indicated certain strong areas of individuality, restraint, industry, ingenuity, and tenacity. One of the most characteristic qualities is yet to be discussed. At first sight, it may seem incongruous. If so, that may be explained on the basis that man himself is a paradox of diametrically opposed forces. The poem "Fire and Ice" admirably demonstrates this point. Sensitivity is surely part of man's finest self. Without it, he is sub-human, and capable of unspeakable crimes. The Nazis have made us realize how horrible man can be. But, if one complacently stops there, he does not face the fact that any man can be bestial and insensitive, if he allows himself to be. Within all men, are unplumbed darknesses. All have their "desert places" with which to scare themselves. But man also has, to turn the phrase, "flower places" where he may grow more lovely.

His sensitivity develops most abundantly in situations where he has frequent contact with the growing things of earth. Tenderness and delight are aroused in him by the many manifestations of nature. In "The Exposed Nest", where young birds have been robbed of protective cover by the mowing machine, he stoops to reconstruct the necessary screen that will shield them



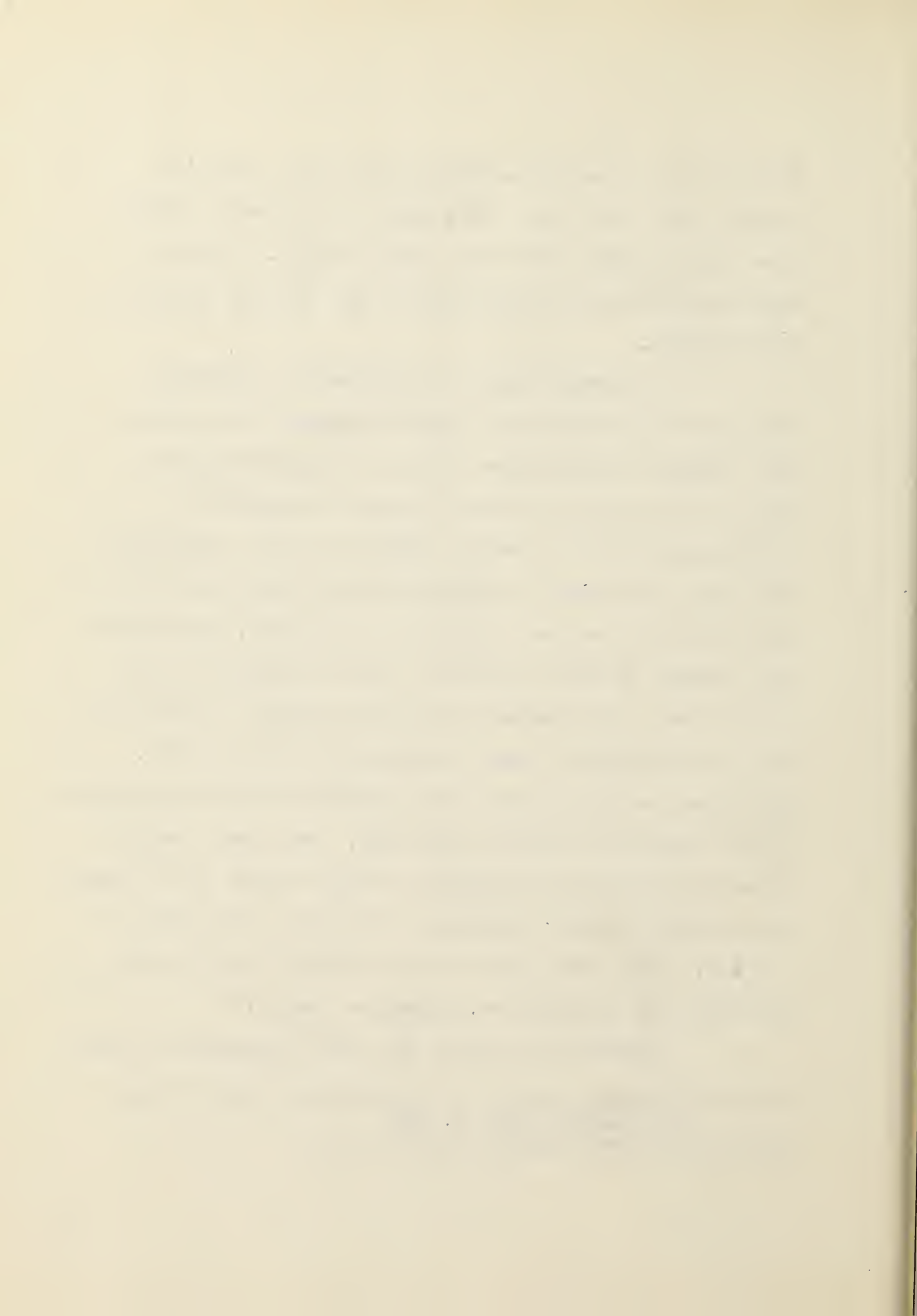
from the too-ardent sun. The man who cares enough to shelter tiny birds will indubitably be one whose ethics have a high regard for other forms of life. A subsequent chapter on "Man and Nature" will further elaborate these points.

In strength there is gentleness. Sensitive souls live on heights and depths undreamed of by their more stolid contemporaries. Frost has said: "Happiness makes up in height for what it lacks in length."<sup>34</sup> Conversely, sorrow is doubly poignant to the sensitive. The lawyer who comes to reimburse the "Broken One" who has lost both feet in an industrial accident, feels that five hundred dollars is all the feet are worth. To the injured man, his feet were far more valuable, because he was one who loved to roam the woods for wild flowers. Bedridden, he knows much of his possible share of happiness in the fields is forever denied him. Since such intangibles as this have no negotiable dollar-value, the "Broken One" suffers without recompense beyond his own inner resources, which prove him to be far better fortified for Life than the insensitive, impatient lawyer.<sup>35</sup>

Sensitivity refines all other attributes of man;

<sup>34</sup>Frost, "Happiness Makes up in Height for What it Lacks in Length" Ibid. p. 439

<sup>35</sup>Frost, "The Self-Seeker", Ibid, p. 117



in many ways it is like "the quality of Mercy". It never imposes on others burdens they cannot bear. In "Not to Keep", a young wife welcomes her soldier-husband back but only for a short nursing period, following which he must return to duty. The same grim parting endured at the war's beginning was yet to do again. The delicate communication between them was not verbal:

She dared no more than ask him with her eyes  
How it was with him for a second trial.  
And with his eyes he asked her not to ask.<sup>36</sup>

Awareness of mood helped these two to keep a most unhappy situation from resolving into tragedy. They spared one another further pain.

The ideal man, for this poet resembles in spirit the adventuring nineteenth century sea-captain. The sea trails may be impossible to follow now, but the spirit of adventure yet lives in his breast. His scope may be narrowed to the confines of a tiny mountain farm, but his courage has not shrunk. That is why Frost writes:

Even the bravest that are slain  
Shall not dissemble their surprise  
On waking to find valor reign,  
Even as on earth, in paradise;  
And where they sought without the sword  
Wide fields of asphodel for a'er,  
To find that utmost reward  
Of daring should be still to dare.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup>Frost, "Not to Keep" Ibid, p. 284

<sup>37</sup>Frost, "The Trial by Existence", Ibid, p. 28





The number of poets who would describe such a paradise are few. Browning is one who thinks it will be an active place. Contrast this paradise with "Sunset and Evening Star". How much more vital and exciting is this place where "the utmost reward of daring should be still to dare"!

Frost is not waiting until the next world before he dares in this. With reckless abandon, he plots to burn a huge pile of leaves, so enormous that the flame will seem like an awakened volcano. "The Bonfire" is his flaming sword, that makes the dim trees stand back. He rouses the others to action, saying:

..burn it as one pile  
 The way we piled it. And let's be the talk  
 Of people brought to windows by a light  
 Thrown from somewhere against their wall-paper.  
 .....  
 Let's all but bring to life this old volcano,  
 If that is what the mountain ever was --  
 And scare ourselves. Let wild fire loose, we will ...

38

Nor is this all he dares to do. In his writings, he takes on even larger adversaries:

Samoa, Russia, Ireland I complain of,  
 No less than England, France and Italy.<sup>39</sup>

One would restrict Frost's meaning if daring were interpreted as physical courage only. His ideal

<sup>38</sup>Frost, "The Bonfire", Ibid, p. 164

<sup>39</sup>Frost, "New Hampshire" Ibid, p. 206





man possesses mental and moral fortitude as well. The curious farmer who burned down his house for money to buy a telescope so that he might investigate the stars appears in two of the poems. That certainly takes strength of conviction and daring. Frost regarded the house burning as an old-fashioned sacrifice by fire to satisfy a life long curiosity about man's place among the stars, and therefore, meet and right.

When one importunes the gods, he not infrequently is answered in a manner far different from that desired. Consequently, it takes courage to give the Powers carte blanche as he does here:

If, as they say, some dust thrown in my eyes  
Will keep my talk from getting overwise,  
I'm not the one for putting off the proof.  
Let it be overwhelming, off a roof  
And around a corner, blizzard snow for dust,  
And blind me to a standstill if it must. <sup>40</sup>

In conclusion, an ideal man, as seen by Frost, is a composite of many fine qualities. Particular emphasis is given to individuality, self-restraint, friendliness, ingenuity, industry, tenacity, sensitivity, and daring. The result is thought-provoking. The world recognizes the theoretical significance of Frost's contentions, having rewarded him four times with a Pulitzer Prize; but it has not yet paid him the compliment of providing a favorable environment for the nurture of fine human beings, such as he would use to people a new Eden.

<sup>40</sup>Frost, "Dust in the Eyes" Ibid, p. 341



## CHAPTER II

## MAN AND NATURE

For them there was really nothing sad.  
 But though they rejoiced in the nest they kept,  
 One had to be versed in country things  
 Not to believe the phoebes wept.<sup>1</sup>

In these lines, Robert Frost demonstrates exactly where he draws the line between Man and Nature. He is too wise to err in the "pathetic fallacy"; he is too well "versed in country things". His is not the casual knowledge that the Sunday motorist may glean from a speeding car. Two weeks vacation in the mountains won't reveal their true relationship. Even two years are but the beginning of this wisdom. "It takes a lifetime of keeping your eyes open and getting down on your knees to see, a lifetime of devoted awareness."<sup>2</sup> Since 1900, he has been working at this problem. From his first farm in Derry, New Hampshire, to another in England, followed by years in Vermont, until he now has a finger in five separate farms, Frost has been uniting his vocation with his avocation. He has been intent on discovering the relationship of Man and Nature.

First, he says it is NOT a mutually sympathetic arrangement. Man and Nature are never to be identified as

<sup>1</sup>Frost, "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things",  
Collected Poems of Robert Frost, p. 300

<sup>2</sup>Coffin, New Poetry of New England, p. 58



two hearts that beat as one. Nowhere does he ever infer that Nature sympathizes with Man. He could never have fathered these lines:

In my own shire, if I was sad  
Homely comforters I had:  
The earth, because my heart was sore,  
Sorrowed for the son she bore;  
And standing hills, long to remain,  
Shared their short-lived comrade's pain.<sup>3</sup>

The Romantic identification of Man with Nature is alien to Frost's experience. Albert Feuillerat understands this about him:

However minutely he observes nature, he does not seem to enter into its moral intimacy. He does not communicate to nature his own pains and joys. He never has with nature those confidential interviews which so many poets have found an occasion to open to us the depths of their souls.<sup>4</sup>

His name is consistently coupled with Wordsworth<sup>5</sup>, though they are more dissimilar than similar. He himself insists that he is not a nature poet. He calls himself a "poet of the people." All nature is related to them. Not they to it as is the way with Wordsworth.<sup>6</sup> Despite these protestations, Frost is still misjudged, as when John Freeman writes:

In the very simplest fact, Frost is, as Shelley put it, made one with Nature, yet scarcely the less himself.<sup>7</sup>

Since this confusion exists, it seems wise to carefully

<sup>3</sup>Housman, A.E., A Shropshire Lad, p. 47

<sup>4</sup>Feuillerat, Revue des Deux Mondes, Series 7, Vol. 17, p. 190

<sup>5</sup>Ward, American Literature, p. 163

<sup>6</sup>Coffin, op. cit. p. 60

<sup>7</sup>Freeman, "Contemporary American Authors", The London Mercury, Vol. 13, p. 177





check Frost's output, and discover anew "country things".

Although Nature on its side is mute and indifferent to Man's need and moods, the converse is not true. Man is sensitive to Nature's moods, and often his inner weather reflects the outer. Frost is enough of a realist to admit this. He may not be able to commune with nature, but in lonely seclusion with her, he may commune with himself.<sup>8</sup> She may not respond to him, but he does to her. For instance, in "Clear and Colder", he gives Wind's recipe for Fall Elixir, compounded of rain in torrents, powder snow, dry brown leaves, cold stars, and splintered branches. Then

Wait and watch the liquor settle.  
I could stand whole dayfuls of it.  
Wind she brews a heady kettle.  
Human beings love it -- love it.  
Gods above are not above it. <sup>9</sup>

Note that he does not motivate Wind with a desire to please humans. That the humans are pleased is of no concern to her. She has supplied the intoxicating happiness here.

In "Leaves Compared with Flowers", the other side of the coin is shown. Here Nature is utilized by man when he is not pleased. In youth, the evil days had not come yet, so he loved the gaudy flowers. But as life

<sup>8</sup>Weirwick, From Whitman to Sandburg in American Poetry, p.178

<sup>9</sup>Frost, "Clear and Cold", Collected Poems of Robert Frost,  
p. 399



became more and more stark, mere color no longer charmed him. What he needed was *multum in parvo*, restraint in design, and the leaves answered this lack. But the answer is not given to all men, (as it would be if Man and Nature were but one), but only to those who are aware of the possibilities. The whole point hinges on man's perception of Nature, not just on the existence of Nature:

I bade men tell me which in brief,  
Which is fairer, flower or leaf.  
They did not have the wit to say,  
Leaves by night and flowers by day.

Leaves and bark, leaves and bark,  
To lean against and hear in the dark.  
Petals I may have once pursued.  
Leaves are all my darker mood.<sup>10</sup>

Frost's perception of nature is so true that he sees these patterns of complement in the simplest manifestations. When he does not discover them he is troubled. Once a melancholy bird outside his window disturbed him so, that he clapped his hands to send it away. He couldn't understand it. Had it happened to another poet, the probable conclusion would have been that the bird was sympathizing with his sorrow. But Frost shoulders his own responsibility:

The fault must partly have been in me.  
The bird was not to blame for his key.

<sup>10</sup>Frost, "Leaves Compared with Flowers", Ibid. p.387



- And of course there must be something wrong  
In wanting to silence any song.<sup>11</sup>

In this particular instance, he admits that sometimes even he is at a loss to fathom the exact relationship between Man and Nature. This lack of dogmatic assertion is quite characteristic. It has frequently been misinterpreted.

Amy Lowell credited him with photographic nature: "He gives back what he sees, unchanged by any mental process."<sup>12</sup> Many critics have repeated this fallacious criticism. The truth of the matter is not in this superficial judgment. Since Frost feels that the relationship of Man and Nature is primarily based on sentient perception, one is correct in saying that this poet gives back what he sees. Yes, but it is so different from man's usual vision, that describing it as "seeing" is to call in ambiguity of the language. For he looks at life in a way that is very novel indeed for any poet in the world to look at it. He looks at it as a man "might rise up of a morning and stare at an entirely new sea after long months of storm, as a piece of beauty newly created and visited by a new light from clouds and sun."<sup>13</sup> Thus, in a very special sense, Miss Lowell is correct about Frost,

<sup>11</sup>Frost, "A Minor Bird", Ibid, p. 316

<sup>12</sup>Lowell, The New Republic, Vol. 2, p. 81

<sup>13</sup>Coffin, op.cit. p. 2





but she seems never to have truly grasped the significance of his type of perception of Nature.

She has been challenged by other critics.

Cornelius Weygandt flatly states:

Frost is never a descriptive poet only. It is always with something intimately human, or capable of being humanized, with something reaching down deep into human experience, that he is concerned.<sup>14</sup>

Mark Van Doren seconds this view of Frost as one who finds Man and Nature bound together by the mental activities of human beings. Herein is the core of Frost's attitude, as expressed by Van Doren:

He selects an object, an animal, a person, a life or whatever other thing he likes, and makes it a symbol of something else which is larger or deeper than itself, so that we read him as we see behind or through his subject matter, and derive a pleasure from doing so.<sup>15</sup>

This confusion about perceived reality and seen reality would not arise if Frost expressed himself in a different manner.

As a brief explanation, so that the reader will understand that Frost has but one central explanation of Man and Nature, and not the many attributed to him by various critics, it is necessary to know how Frost expresses his point of view. His style is "synecdoche", (Greek, meaning the part being used to represent the whole). He gives in his poems only the part which he

<sup>14</sup>Weygandt, The White Hills, p.170

<sup>15</sup>Van Doren, "The Permanence of Robert Frost", The American Scholar, Vol.5, p.193



intends to symbolize a given whole: a bonfire to mean the world conflagration of war. Now, the slip between the cup and the lip occurs in the literal-minded reader, who either takes the bonfire to mean a bonfire, or else to mean whatever fits into his preconceived notions of the poet's intentions. By using synecdoche, Frost has somehow miraculously transferred part of the creative process to the reader, so that in reconstructing the whole as inferred, the reader shares in his genius. For many, this is the appeal of Frost. His poetry does not age, because each reading creates it afresh.

Nature and Man are often antagonists in this world that neither of them made. Frequently, it takes all man's energy to cope with the forces of nature that are not in line with his particular plans. Human plans determine whether the same natural phenomenon shall be helpful or antagonistic. For instance, a premature spring may encourage the early planted seedlings to sprout, but the same warmth may ruin the autumn's apple crop by inviting the buds out too soon. Winter snow may help a young orchard keep warm, but it may also bring storm fear:

When the wind works against us in the dark,  
 And pelts with snow  
 The lower chamber window on the east,  
 And whispers with a sort of stifled bark,  
 The beast,  
 Come out! Come out!

.....



- My Heart owns a doubt  
 Whether 'tis in us to arise with day  
 And save ourselves unaided. <sup>16</sup>

The farther removed from rural scenes, the more tenuous becomes this antagonism. Storm fear is unlikely when man has powerful steam-plows to subdue it. Once, however, there was a little brook that ran zig-zag over a plot of ground, that the encroaching city decided to appropriate for housing projects. This brook defied man to conquer it. The apple trees on the land were cut for firewood; the grass was cemented down under the geometric pavement. The water, however, was too great a force to treat in the same manner, so the engineers devised a stone sewer-like dungeon for it in the fetid darkness. Seemingly, man won in this case, yet Frost ponders:

But I wonder if  
 From its being kept forever under  
 The thoughts may not have risen that so keep  
 This new-built city from both work and sleep.<sup>17</sup>

Occasionally man forgets just how things are between him and Nature. Then he may taunt a squat old mountain to dare to roll down a stone on him. From this point of view, he is safe; but in that moment, rocks begin to rain. Panic overwhelms him, and he reconsiders. Never again will he prate of somnolent Nature, for he knows that

<sup>16</sup>Frost, "Storm Fear", Collected Poems of Robert Frost, p.13

<sup>17</sup>Frost, "A Brook in the City", Ibid, p. 285





hostilities are then only in the truce stage .Rapid fire may quickly change the status quo. <sup>18</sup>

Nature is the opponent who takes not so much by aggression, as by infiltration tactics. When Man decides to abandon Far-Away Meadow and cultivate it no longer, the

Trees, seeing the opening,  
March into a shadowy claim.<sup>19</sup>

Whatever Man would keep civilized, he must constantly fight for. In the war of nerves, Nature can out-wit any contender. It may be years before she achieves her victory. Here is a battle communique that shows her as a victor after half a century:

Here further up the mountain slope  
Than there was ever any hope,  
My father built, enclosed a spring,  
Strung chains of walls round everything,  
Subdued the growth of earth to grass,  
And brought our various lives to pass.  
A dozen boys and girls we were.  
The mountain seemed to like the stir,  
And made of us a little while --  
With always something in her smile.  
Today she wouldn't know our name  
(No girl's of course, has stayed the same).  
The mountain pushed us off her knees.  
And now her lap is full of trees.<sup>20</sup>

The father was active in his taming of the mountain, building ramparts and defenses. The next generation thought her friendly and forgot about the necessary

<sup>18</sup>Frost, "On Taking From the Top to Broaden the Base", Ibid, p. 389

<sup>19</sup>Frost, "The Last Mowing", Ibid, p. 338

<sup>20</sup>Frost, "The Birthplace", Ibid, p. 339



barriers. Now, - they are replaced by encroaching trees.

This idea that one of the most usual forms of Nature's infiltration is the advance of trees is cleverly ridiculed by Frost, when he describes a case of "Dendrophobia". This afflicted man went to cut down a grove of trees. The task seemed over-powering. The antagonism of Nature was too potent. So, he fled, dropping his axe in his hurry. His explanation:

Nature is cruel, man is sick of blood;  
There's been enough shed without shedding mine.  
Remember Birnam Wood! The wood's in flux! 21

This weird man thought that Nature was terrifying in the raw. The only wood he could stand was that which has been to the saw-mill, and "educated" into inoffensive boards. Frost condemns such an attitude with:

I'd hate to runaway from Nature. 22

Of course, the man who wrote "Birches" could never be estranged from Nature. He would always realize that the seeming antagonism which she occasionally displays is subject always to man's ingenuity. Man can make of any natural situation what he will. An entente cordial can easily be arranged, if each is willing to admit incontestable facts. It is "Birches" which illustrates this

<sup>21</sup>Frost, "New Hampshire", Ibid. p. 210

<sup>22</sup>Frost, Ibid. p. 211



tacit arrangement.<sup>23</sup> Ice storms have so weighted down the slender trees that they no longer stand proudly erect. Frost could have interpreted this to mean that ice destroys their pride, as Nature can likewise quench him. He does not choose to see it in this light. Consequently his attitude leads him to be truthful in his interpretation. Nothing more.

One aspect of Man's relationship to Nature is her role as Provider. The lot that falls to man in this arrangement is that of devoted toil. The rewards are fair and the fees established. Sometimes extraneous events enter to deflect the flow of the harvest, for instance, the theft of Squire Matthew's Golden Hesperidee Apples before picking season.<sup>24</sup> Generally speaking, Frost subscribes to the theory that a man shall reap as he sows. He takes deep joy in this partnership with Nature. He is:

Slave to a springtime passion for the earth.  
How Love burns through the Putting in the Seed  
On through the watching for that early birth  
When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,

The sturdy seedling with arched body comes  
Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs.  
25

He glories in the apple-harvest. Even crops that he has not planted thrill him. Perhaps, part of the reason why Frost accepts with equanimity the storms and floods of stern-visaged Nature, is because he knows

<sup>23</sup>Frost, "Birches", Ibid., p. 152

<sup>24</sup>Frost, "The Golden Hesperidee", p. 367

<sup>25</sup>Frost, "Putting in the Seed" Ibid. p. 155





her to be Janus-faced with unexpected rewards, such as blueberries available for the picking. Some of his friends find this type of bounty sufficient to their needs, remarking debonairly:

It's a nice way to live,  
Just taking what Nature is willing to give,  
Not forcing her hand with harrow and plow.<sup>26</sup>

Frost likes to work in the soil, saying that labor is the sweetest dream of all. He has such a mania for harvesting that the analogy comes to him as he is gathering the dead leaves into the shed in autumn. He admits:

Next to nothing for use.  
But a crop is a crop,  
And who is to say where  
The harvest shall stop? <sup>27</sup>

In this manner, he next turns his attention to an equally sensible sowing:

A plow, they say, to plow the snow.  
They cannot mean to plant it, though --  
Unless in bitterness to mock  
At having cultivated rock. <sup>28</sup>

Acquisitiveness is not the basis for his desire for harvest. He is one who can enjoy nature's bounty without feeling the urge to exploit it. Once he came upon a magnificent windfall of apples, just off the routine road, that evidently were not intended for market. No human

<sup>26</sup>Frost, "Blueberries", Ibid. p. 80

<sup>27</sup>Frost, "Gathering Leaves" Ibid, p. 290

<sup>28</sup>Frost, "Plowmen", Ibid, p. 295



- hands apparently had aided Nature in the production of this harvest. His impulse was not to immediately gather up in gunny-sacks for the cider-mill this profitable fruit. On the contrary, he exulted in the unharvested plenty, the never-to-be-harvested plenty. Always, he prays that the utility of Nature will not be so blinding to Man that he will miss the beauty of her lavishness.<sup>29</sup>

This view of Nature runs counter to usual reaction of economic-minded men. Impractical is what they term it. Frost realizes he is in the minority, and occasionally to test his convictions, he will honestly try to see their point of view. Usually, the experience may be likened to touching tentatively a sore spot, just to discover if it is still tender. Every time, he finds his original belief substantiated, and his distaste for money-grubbers increased.

He once related one of these encounters. More than likely, the telling of it was intended to soften the hatred in his heart for a "practical" man. Poetry with Frost is "a form of forgiveness", he once told this author. When someone has irritated him so that the recollection makes his breast seethe, he writes a poem which puts the emotion on paper and ends his uneasiness.

<sup>29</sup>Frost, "Unharvested", Ibid, p. 400



The transference lightens his heart. His anger in this instance, was toward a city buyer of Christmas trees. Actually, Frost didn't want to sell his young fir balsams, but to be reasonable, he decided to hear the agent out. Together, they went out to the hillside to inspect the crop. With no appreciation beyond their commercial value, the would-be purchaser sized them up. He

Paused to say beneath some lovelier one,  
 With a buyer's moderation, "That would do."  
 I thought so too, but wasn't there to say so. 30

After belittling the trees in the time-honored trading fashion, he offered Frost thirty dollars for a thousand Christmas trees. The prospect shocked him:

Thirty dollars seemed so small beside  
 The extent of pasture I should strip, three cents  
 (For that was all they figured out apiece),  
 Three cents so small ....31

Once more, Frost proved to himself that man must exercise restraint in the harvest, else he will lose all joy of it.

Obviously, Frost's relationship is not a selfish one. The stars are as valuable to him as his vegetable garden. His love is catholic. More than a dozen times, he has avowed his devotion to the stars. Here, he demonstrates conclusively how alien he is to the Romantic movement.

30 Frost, "Christmas Trees", Ibid. p. 133  
 31 Frost, Ibid. p. 134





- Even his relationship with the stars is based on that intellectual perception which underlies all his dealings with Nature. Not once does he idealize them. Nonetheless, stars taken just for their integral value are worthy of much thought and comment. He is not looking to them for any direction or inspiration. Here, again, exploitation is not his aim. He observes them closely, because their beauty commands his attention. One of his earliest poems in A Boy's Will. sets the pattern for his subsequent utterances. Therein, he remarks that it seems as if the stars were keenly interested in man's fate, but the truth is they look "with neither love nor hate"; they are like some marble statue's marble eyes without the gift of sight.<sup>32</sup> As James Wilson has observed, Frost does not read into nature "an animism that he does not find".<sup>33</sup>

When he looks up into the sky, it is for the intellectual pleasure of limning the constellations, his "skymarks in the blue". The mathematical exactitudes of astronomy appeal far more to him than any subjective interpretation. He and a Brad McLaughlin, who burned his house for the fire-insurance, so that he might buy a telescope, spent many a night "star-splitting". Knowledge was their primary aim. The satisfaction of human curiosity

<sup>32</sup>Frost, "Stars", Ibid, p. 12

<sup>33</sup>Wilson, "In Human Terms", The Virginia Quarterly Review, Vol. 7, p. 318



is equally important to them. They stood by the telescope and pointed their thoughts skyward. They were no scientists with hypotheses to prove. Their only motivation was to acquaint themselves with the facts of the stars; the possible deductions were of secondary importance. <sup>34</sup> This patient arrangement is beautifully expressed in a pensive poem:

You'll wait a long, long time for anything much  
To happen in heaven beyond the floats of clouds  
And the Northern Lights that run like tingling  
                  nerves.  
The sun and moon get crossed, but they never  
                  touch,-  
Nor strike out fire from each other, nor crash  
                  out loud.  
The planets seem to interfere in their curves,  
But nothing ever happens, no harm is done.  
We may as well go patiently on with our life,  
And look elsewhere than to stars and moon and  
                  sun  
For the shocks and changes we need to keep us  
                  same.  
It's true the longest drought will end in rain,  
The longest peace in China will end in strife.  
Still it wouldn't reward the watcher to stay  
                  awake  
In hopes of seeing the calm of heaven break  
On his particular time and personal sight.  
That calm seems certainly safe to last tonight. <sup>35</sup>

If the stars soothe him, rain does not. Torrents supply for him "the shocks and changes" necessary to his sanity. Frost knows well that man is "fire and ice", and has need of calm stars and also turbulent storms. One

<sup>34</sup>Frost, "The Star-Splitter", Ibid, p. 218

<sup>35</sup>Frost, "On looking Up by Chance at the Constellations",  
Ibid, p. 346



never hears him clamoring for an easy painless world. In "To Earthward", he rejects all pleasures that are not dashed with the salt of pain. Storms seem to satisfy this need. They draw him from his cozy study to brave them. He cares not how far he travels with the line-storm for a companion. If it more resembles a rout than a quiet rain, so much the better.

As strong is rain without as wine within,  
As magical as sunlight on the skin.

I have been one no dwelling could contain  
When there was rain, .... 36

Evidently, Frost has managed to strike up a partnership with Nature that enables him to appreciate all phases of existence. He relishes each experience with such naiveté that the blasé sophisticate is puzzled by his intensity. Each act is significant for him.

Perhaps the answer is best stated by Robert Coffin, when he writes:

A man doing small farming has great friends at his elbow: the seasons, frost and rain, night and day, and others, too. Not the great aristocratic friends in books, preaching perfection, but the great commoners who teach a man how to get along: gladness, compassion, fear, grief...; good neighbors for a man who doesn't want to be alone, or grow out of the real world into one he has to build for himself.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup>Frost, "The Wind and the Rain", Ibid. p.442

<sup>37</sup>Coffin, op.cit. p.53





This is living on a plane that lesser mortals can well envy. Frost certainly is well-adjusted to life in this world. He knows gladness and grief, fear and compassion from his associations with Nature.

The final facet of his relationship is her beauty and its effect on Man. Often this aspect is obscured from many who know her only in the guise of antagonist or provider. The esthetic satisfactions which her beauty brings to the heart of the discerning are as important as the intellectual curiosity, or physical challenge to the senses which her sterner moods excite. With Frost, the strongest bond between Man and Nature is that forged by beauty. Mere sensuous delight does not form this link. The perception, commented upon earlier in this chapter, is the basis of its power. By it, the loveliness of Nature is transmitted into abiding understanding between her and Man. Depth and discrimination enter into it. Nature supplies the changing beauties of the seasons and Man contributes his spiritual and mental appreciations. The role which active perception plays here cannot be over-emphasized. It is that that distinguishes Frost from others, because his perceptions are more true. Robert's Coffin becomes almost poetic when he strives to prove that this contention is justified.



Beside Frost, Hesiod writes mere calendars for ancient cattle kings and agricultural demi-gods; the Greek pastoral is the rural living of aristocrats playing like Marie Antoinette at milking, playing at love and singing; Horace's rural song seems like that of a tired business man weekending in the country; Virgil's too, seems like vacation poetry of an urban man, in spite of his having modern eyes for livestock and bees. Beside Frost's, Spenser's nature is concocted, and Spenser's rusticity, a game of carving hearts on trees; Herrick's is an archaic Cavalier slenderness and gaiety, this notes of old chamber music. Wordsworth's seems, for all its symphonic magnificence, a country living mixed up with a static morality and philosophic pattern too old to us to be vital; Wordsworth's people seem too whole and too picturesque and too good to be true. The country loveliness of Keats and Shelley seems almost theatrically unusual, and too many human features are on the wind and clouds, on autumn and the spring. Frost has put the real country into words.<sup>38</sup>

The real beauty of nature, rose begonias, blue-butterfly days, spring's first green-gold, purple-fringed flowers, jewel-small meadows, flowering trees, sailing clouds -- are so truly perceived by Frost that he cannot strike a false note in describing them. His descriptions are but symbols for the bond which beauty forges between Man and Nature. By his emphasis, he has indicated that this is the most important of the links between Man and Nature. Nature is challenging as an antagonist; she is benevolent as a provider; stimulating as a preceptor; but her beauty is that which will bind Man to her forever.

<sup>38</sup>Coffin, op.cit. p. 54



### CHAPTER III

#### MAN AND SOCIETY

He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."  
 Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder  
 If I could put a notion in his head:  
 "Why do they make good neighbors?"<sup>1</sup>

Robert Frost has entertained in his own head many notions of the various relationships which human beings establish with one another. His is a humanistic attitude which places Man on a plane of life that lies above Nature and below God. He delights in observing the variations on the patterns of intimacy, neighborliness, citizenship and universality. No matter how the gregarious instinct is expressed, he delights in observing it. In fact, one of his dominant interests is people.<sup>2</sup>

The convincing realism of his dramatic personae is so powerful that one always feels that his characters have been modelled from life. Although he is devoted to the dramatic, he never manipulates his actors into unnatural positions simply to achieve more striking effects. His canny selection of incident precludes this necessity. Lascelles Abercrombie remarks: "Life has seldom been made into literature with as little manipulation."<sup>3</sup> Since Frost's society apparently is definable, all critics agree in

<sup>1</sup>Frost, "Mending Wall", Collected Poems of Robert Frost, p.47

<sup>2</sup>Newdick, "Robert Frost and the Dramatic", N.E. Quarterly  
 Vol. X, p. 262

<sup>3</sup>Abercrombie, "Review of North of Boston", The Nation  
 Vol. 15:11, p. 423.





locating it in New England.

This regional flavor is not particularly noticeable in the intimate family groups which he portrays. Perhaps the cosmopolitan touch may be traced to the subjective element in his particular treatment. It is reported that his wife was so closely akin to him that he called her his Muse.<sup>4</sup> No wonder then that several of his poems deal with perfect understanding which can exist between man and wife. Except that the tone is particularly restrained in these connubial poems, there is little else to suggest New England. That flavor is much more pronounced in his community poems. When Warren and Mary are talking about the hired man, the two of them are so in tune that much more is hinted at in their conversation than is ever explicitly stated. Neither questions the other on the provocative definition of home that each in turn gives:

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there,  
They have to take you in."

"I should have called it  
Something you somehow haven't to deserve."<sup>5</sup>

The concepts here involved are intricate, but no analysis is needed by either Mary or Warren. The differences in their points of view are merely complements of their attitudes that understanding has knit into congeniality. Mary is not a

<sup>4</sup>Time, Vol. XXXIII, p. 86

<sup>5</sup>Frost, "The Death of the Hired Man", Collected Poems of Robert Frost, p.53.



rubber-stamp. She supplies the irrational kindness that women are noted and beloved for providing. The normalness of this marriage of strength and tenderness is far more inspiring to Frost than any other combination.

In his own union, to Eleanor Miriam White, who was co-valedictorian with him in Lawrence High School, a delicate balance was maintained which lasted until her recent death. She supplied not only the inspiration he needed, but also the encouragement, the faith, the trust in his genius which sustained him in the lean years. Whatever he needed, she supplied. In fact, the one romantic remark of her life was what sent them to England: "I should like to live under thatch." Actually, it was the turning point in his career, the selling of his New Hampshire farm, and going to farm in England where he found a publisher. The legend that he was driven to England by the indifference of American editors is apocryphal. "I went to England to be in England . . . I carried my MS. into London in my pocket, left it with David Nutt, and never had to show it to anyone else." <sup>6</sup>

While waiting for recognition, Frost was exceptionally fortunate in the blessing bestowed by his wife's sympathy and understanding.

<sup>6</sup> quoted in Frost, "The Literary Record", American Issues, Vol. 2, p. 742



Their relationship was not a static one, but rather one that quite closely approximated the norm that Professor Herford observed in Shakespeare's treatment of love and marriage: "ardent but not sensual, tender but not sentimental, pure but not ascetic, moral but not puritanic, joyous but not frivolous, mirthful and witty but not cynical." <sup>7</sup> For proof of this, read "In the Home Stretch".

A man and wife are struggling to get partially settled in their new farm home, rushing to get the heavy things stowed in the proper places while they still have the brawny movers to assist. The dark is advancing and in the dusk the men sweat to set the stove pipe on the stove. They leave, a tremendous disorder in their wake. Despite this, the new tenants stop to talk a moment, to taste the newness and the rightness of their chosen farm. For a moment, the scorn that the movers had expressed for the old-fashioned, cold place made it seem less attractive. But the bond between the two tightens up the slack, as they prepare to sup on bread and butter. Both are "drunk-nonsensical tired out", but they agree this is paradise. What makes the difference between the impression of the movers that the farm is absolutely God-forsaken, and the

<sup>7</sup> Herford, "Shakespeare's Treatment of Love and Marriage", p.18.





conviction of the pair that it is heaven? What indeed but the bond between them, which produces this supper conversation:

"It's all so much what I have always wanted,  
I can't believe it's what you wanted, too."

"Shouldn't you like to know?"

"I'd like to know  
If it is what you wanted, then how much  
You wanted it for me."

"A troubled conscience!  
You don't want me to tell if I don't know."

"I don't want to find out what can't be known.  
But who first said the word to come?"

"My dear,  
"It's who first thought the thought." <sup>8</sup>

When you have two people so delicately adjusted to one another that it is almost impossible to distinguish which one first uttered the mutual dream, you have about as perfect an adjustment of humans in intimate society as possible.

Frost realizes that often-times the mores of the larger social groupings are not identical with those of the smaller unit. It is consistent with his general philosophy that he puts more emphasis on the latter than the former. In both his first book and his latest, he places more value on the less complex. One of the first expressions of this

<sup>8</sup> Frost, "In the Home Stretch", Collected Poems of Robert Frost, p. 145



thought in his poetry is the delightful little "In Neglect":

They leave us to the way we took,  
As two in whom they were proved mistaken,  
That we sit sometimes in the wayside nook,  
With mischievous, vagrant, seraphic look,  
And try if we cannot feel forsaken. 9

In his more recent books, he has repeated this idea as in  
"Not Quite Social" in A Further Range. 10

The poignancy of misunderstanding in the family has not escaped his observation. The dramatic tension between two that have loved and are estranged is his theme in "Home Burial". The wife has turned in bitterness upon the husband because he attempted to resume work-a-day life too soon after the funeral of their only baby. He is bewildered, humbly begs for an explanation. He knows as well as she that words can't recreate their understanding:

"We could have some arrangement  
By which I'd bind myself to keep hands off  
Anything special you're a-mind to name.  
Though I don't like such things 'twixt those that love.  
Two that don't love can't live together without them.  
But two that do can't live together with them." 11

When she explains her point of view to him, she is not uttering a mutual thought. It is so alien to his way of thinking he can only believe that evil spirits prompted it. The more they talk, the wider the chasm grows, until the only way he has to bridge it is brute force.

9 Frost, "In Neglect", Collected Poems of Robert Frost, p.23

10 Frost, "Not Quite Social", Ibid, p. 403

11 Frost, "Home Burial", Ibid, p.71



Frost has written of the two extremes in married life: complete understanding and complete misunderstanding. Of course, there are varying degrees he has not missed. In "The Generations of Men", the boy and girl who meet for the first time achieve a remarkably fine interchange.<sup>12</sup> "West-running Brook" is almost mystical in its portrayal of human communications.<sup>13</sup> The ties between the young "Hill Wife" and her husband break suddenly and swiftly:

And he learned of finalities  
Besides the grave.<sup>14</sup>

John and his housekeeper, Estelle, (also his common-law wife) were well adjusted until social pressure from the community subtly poisoned their understanding.<sup>15</sup> Frost does not judge in this case; he simply presents the facts, showing that he is aware of all the possible variations on this theme.

Before leaving the intimate part of the social structure, a brief survey of parent-child connections as Frost interprets them may prove worth-while. Being the father of four children, three daughters and a son, he speaks from experience. His attitude is always tender and protective. It just escapes being sentimental because of

<sup>12</sup> Frost, "The Generations of Men", Collected Poems of Robert Frost, p. 94

<sup>13</sup> Frost, "West-running Brook", Ibid. p. 327

<sup>14</sup> Frost, "Hill Wife", Ibid. p. 162

<sup>15</sup> Frost, "The Housekeeper", Ibid. p. 103





its sincerity. The tone of "The Pasture" may be interpreted as indicative of his great respect for children. Note that the child is not commanded to come, but is free to choose. Neither is the child told it would be good for him to come. The moral didacticism of patriarchal parents is strikingly absent. The easy comradeship which inspires confidence breathes through these lines, revealing Frost's inner heart:

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;  
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away  
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):  
I sha'n't be gone long. --You come too.

I'm going out to fetch the little calf  
That's standing by the mother. It's so young  
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.  
I sha'n't be gone long. --You come too. <sup>16</sup>

Children rate respect in his code; and he even has apologized to two of his grandchildren in "A Record Stride". <sup>17</sup>

Youngsters respond to his poetry, so to some degree it is evident that he speaks their language.

If Frost has devoted more attention to family relationships than to community adjustments, that which he has said about the larger social environment has been so effective that it has blinded many of his critics to any other aspect of his writings. For instance, the evaluation of him in Twentieth Century Poetry is:

<sup>16</sup> Frost, "The Pasture", Collected Poems of Robert Frost p.1.

<sup>17</sup> Frost, "A Record Stride" Ibid, p.381.



"Thoroughly and deeply a poet of locale. He--it might almost be said---is New England." 18

Robert P. T. Coffin has quite exhaustively analyzed the region, as a native, and his impression is:

The sensitive, aristocratic New Englander is fast disappearing, or has fallen on evil days. He is a man who has culture for his blood almost, he must always live out of books, as well as out of the earth, and must constantly work to improve himself. But the other old-stock New Englander survives, in all his vigor and toughness. He is the sturdy New Englander who never expected too much, and so was never disappointed, who worked himself into his woods and stonewalls and barns. He stands up now with his feet solidly planted on his ledges, just as tall as he ever was, and keeps an eye on the weather and on men's ways. And he is a well man. 19

Nine generations of Frosts lived in New Hampshire before Robert Lee Frost came, so the classifying of him is legitimate. His family coat of arms is a grey squirrel and a pine tree. To Muriel Rukeyser, he is so New Englandish that his poems are "blue-prints" of it.<sup>20</sup> The argument among the critics is not whether he represents New England, but exactly which aspect he reveals.

Mr. Coffin is convinced that Frost is a poet of the sinewy, sturdy New England that cannot be conquered because it is not vulnerable. Its roots are in the soil, deep enough to withstand the attacks of ambition which overcomes so many in the city. Coffin has only the deepest respect

<sup>18</sup>Drinkwater, Twentieth Century Poetry, p. 327

<sup>19</sup>Coffin, op cit., p. 49

<sup>20</sup>Rukeyser, "In a Speaking Voice", Poetry, Vol. LIV, p. 219



and admiration for this type of integrity. These natives know that all their ingenuity is required to succeed in their hard mode of life. Many misfortunes, such as ulcers and income taxes, never bother them because they have drawn in their reserves so that they may adequately defend that which they have. This conservation of forces has been interpreted by many as defeat.

Amy Lowell is one of the most devastating of these critics, because she professes to criticize from the standpoint of a fellow-New Englander. She is too much a city-New Englander to appreciate Frost's point of view. Hers was once a voice of tremendous authority. Her impression was that Frost's writings were "the epitome of a decaying New England." <sup>21</sup> Since she was a leader, many others followed with similar judgments where she pointed. Ten years later, Clement Wood was convinced that New England was rotten to the core:

Frost shows the same human dryrot, less as a degree than as a confession....man has failed. He may have felt that he owed this to the land which bore him to erect a monument to its death less crumbling than marble.<sup>22</sup>

Other critics divide the honors of tolling New England's death-knell between Frost and E.A. Robinson. Says J.G. Fletcher: "If Robinson's poetry clearly present the mind

<sup>21</sup> Lowell, The New Republic, Vo.2:16, p.81.

<sup>22</sup> Wood, Poets of America, p.302





of New England, the poetry of Robert Frost no less clearly presents its heart." 23

The critics are in opposite camps: Coffin and Untermeyer declare that Frost writes of an unconquered New England: the opponents say the New England is a defeated one. The man who best can dispel this confusion is Robert Frost himself. In the title-poem of New Hampshire, he answers thus:

I may as well confess myself the author  
Of several books against the world in general.  
To take them as against a special state  
Or even nation's to restrict my meaning.  
.....  
Samoa, Russia, Ireland I complain of,  
No less than England, France and Italy.  
Because I wrote my novels in New Hampshire  
Is no proof that I aimed them at New Hampshire.<sup>24</sup>

I am not a regional poet, he declares. Having once learned that, there is little point in determining which New England he is depicting. Analysis will only reveal a mode of thinking that would have result from any other classical realist's observation of this world. Frost has been called a good Greek<sup>25</sup> and also "Puck in a sack suit." 26 Obviously, his is a wide view, which his whimsy sometimes makes the Ploniuses among the critics murmur first, how like a whale, and then how like a camel. Actually, his keen observations on community living are applicable in all civilized societies,

<sup>23</sup>Fletcher, Chapbook, "Some Contemporary American Authors," p.5

<sup>24</sup>Frost, New Hampshire, "New Hampshire" p."

<sup>25</sup>Munson, "Robert Frost and the Humanistic Temper",  
The Bookman, p.419

<sup>26</sup>Colum, "A Yankee Sage", The Book of the Month Club News



superficial differences excepted.

Brad McLaughlin is one of Frost's favorite people. He burned down his house for the fire-insurance so that he could buy a telescope to study the stars. Everyone in town knew what he had done. Was he condemned? The first reaction against him was that he should be punished the next day:

But the first thing next morning we reflected  
If one by one we counted people out  
For the least sin, it wouldn't take us long  
to get so we had no one left to live with.  
For to be social is to be forgiving.<sup>27</sup>

Frost agrees with Hamlet: to be social is to be forgiving. Immediately that is applied to community life, how much friction it banishes. How much allowance it makes for human frailty. Tolerance is part of his code. When asked whether he would elevate New Hampshire's people or her mountains, he chose the latter to raise. His is a "live-and-let-live" philosophy.

Between men, he likes to see genuine neighborliness. He has only gentle scorn for the conceited little professor in "A Hundred Collars".<sup>28</sup> Lafe, the country newspaper collector, shows the right attitude of brotherhood, even though the professor is too timid to accept gifts in the

<sup>27</sup>Frost, "The Star-Splitter", Collected Poems of Robert Frost p. 219

<sup>28</sup>Frost, "A Hundred Collars", Ibid, p.61



spirit\_given. Lafe wants to give his out-grown collars to the wizened little teacher, whose withdrawing tendencies are so pronounced as to be rude. He is absolutely incapable of responding to friendly overtures. He doesn't fit in with Frost's philosophy of how a man should act toward others.

In "Snow", the Coles display the accepted kindly procedure of helping Brother Meserve during a storm. He has stopped to rest his horses; his hosts urge him to spend the night. Meserve feels a compulsion to push on. Each has his own conviction. The Coles are magnanimous enough to allow Meserve to make his own decision, because every man is entitled to that privilege.<sup>29</sup> That is Frost's "live-and-let-live" philosophy again. He believes that community relations can be solidly built upon a foundation that allows for freedom of choice and respect for individuality. As Van Wyck Brooks has more grandly summarized it: "A True folk-mind. Frost was a mystical democrat, compassionately filled with a deep regard for the dignity of ordinary living." <sup>30</sup>

With Society in its larger manifestations than the family and the neighborhood, Frost is much less concerned. Perhaps this stems from his inability to take masses of men to his heart as he can smaller groups. He thinks that if one

<sup>29</sup>Frost. "Snow". Collected Poems of Robert Frost p.180

<sup>30</sup>Brooks, New England: Indian Summer, p.542-3





takes care of the smaller units, the larger ones will of necessity reflect the same quality. A man may honestly shrink from assuming the entire responsibility for a nation and not be condemned. On the other hand, he may not abstain from his local duties. Mass formations, per se, do not entrance him.

Great impersonal panaceas fathered by the government seem to him more harmful than otherwise. The bureaucrats are "greedy-good-doers" who ruin that which they claim to save. "A Roadside Stand" expresses Frost's disgust at all schemes that ineffectually aim at lopping off branches while the root of the trouble is ignored.<sup>31</sup> The day of benefits, enforced by a patristic government, is an evil one. It saps self-reliance, breaks down human initiative, develops herds. Many people do not see the destruction which a misguided government sows when it indiscriminately passes out social amelioratives. Frost is aware, and battles against it. That is what Padraic Colum means by:

He likes the nation, every nation, and he dislikes  
the state, every state.<sup>32</sup>

From the nation, Frost derives great satisfactions. Here the united independence which he values has come together

<sup>31</sup> Frost, "A Roadside Stand", Collected Poems of Robert Frost  
p. 370

<sup>32</sup> Colum, op. cit. .



to produce a great and powerful country. Powerful in the strength of the Founding Fathers who preached an even sterner gospel of self-reliance, than does Frost. In many respects, he is akin to them.

No ship of all that under sail or steam  
Have gathered people to us more and more  
But Pilgrim-manned the Mayflower in a dream  
Has been her anxious convoy in to shore.<sup>33</sup>

The depth of his devotion to the United States is something that belongs to the realm which he said "will bear some keeping still about." However, he has mischievously indicated it by his whimsical "A Record Stride", in which he put one foot in the Atlantic, and later the other in the Pacific:

And I ask all to try to forgive me  
For being as over-elated  
As if I had measured the country  
And got the United States stated. <sup>34</sup>

His enthusiasm for this symbol reveals the equally high regard in which he holds his country.

The same bantering tone is used in "Not Quite Social", which defends his fleeing from complex society to more congenial areas. He is not unlike a woodchuck that he once observed, who builds a particularly secure little burrow and then sits back guardedly "as one who pretends he and the world are friends." <sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Frost, "Immigrants", Collected Poems of Robert Frost  
p. 333

<sup>34</sup> Frost, "A Record Stride" Ibid p. 382

<sup>35</sup> Frost, "A Drumlin Woodchuck" Ibid p. 365



The implied social criticism is that one and the world can never truly be friends.

Not until "Build Soil", did Frost directly square up to this problem of Man in relation to national and international Society. For once, indirection is banished, and although irony is employed, it would be difficult for even the most obtuse to miss the rapier meanings. Is man in the groupings of representative government as significant as when he stands alone? This is his impression of Congress:

They're in the best position of us all  
To know if anything is very wrong.

. . . . .  
As long as lightly all their live-long sessions,  
Like a yard full of school boys out at recess  
Before their plays and games were organized,  
They yelling mix tag, hide-and-seek, hop-scotch,  
And leap frog in each other's way,--all's well.<sup>36</sup>

Congress certainly does not improve Frost's already low estimate of Assembled Men.

Despite his condemnation of them, the urge to personally accuse each Congressman of his sins does not move him. He will not call names and say who is guilty, although he will admit there is guilt. The function of the poet is otherwise. He has respect for the law-makers, who in the course of their regular activities, must expect calumny whether deserved or not. Because of this, Frost refrains from judging

<sup>36</sup> Frost, "Build Soil", Ibid p. 422





each one personally but he admits that in the aggregate. they definitely are evil.

The "socialization" of all activities, which aims at the throttling of human initiative by proclaiming to make things good for everyone, he laughs to scorn. Too frequently the result of short-sighted socialization is that the bad, instead of the much touted good, of them is all that is realized. Ambition has been socialized, so that our youth no longer are inspired to be leaders. Their slogan is: "None shall be as ambitious as he can." <sup>37</sup> A more striking example of his irony against socialization (which he considers degrading shackles to individuality) is his mock tirade against unsocialized ingenuity:

But the worst one of all to leave uncurbed,  
Unsocialized, is ingenuity:  
Which for no sordid self-aggrandizement.  
For nothing but its own blind satisfaction  
.....  
Works in the dark as much against us as for us.  
Even while we talk some chemist at Columbia  
Is stealthily contriving wool from jute  
That when let loose upon the grazing world  
Will put ten thousand farmers out of sheep.

.....  
Bounds should be set  
To ingenuity for being so cruel  
In bringing change unheralded on the unready.<sup>38</sup>

Frost's sincerity in de-bunking a system that would arbitrarily try to limit by directives and sentimentality the optimum

<sup>37</sup>Frost, "Build Soil" Ibid, p. 424.

<sup>38</sup>Frost, "Build Soil" Ibid. p. 424.



development of one's nature endowment is deeply motivated. He believes that one can't start with a pre-conceived answer but that one must begin with the parts before one can safely plan the whole. A coherent whole by virtue of its very structure is predestined by its component parts. Society can never be more perfect than the individuals which form it.

The unfortunate outcome of present-day global planning is the loss of this conviction. Frost says that the world now is in a cosmical dilation. No one considers the personal point of view any longer; the fashionable one is the interpersonal slant.

My friends all know I'm interpersonal,  
But long before I'm interpersonal  
Away 'way down inside I'm personal.  
Just so before we're international  
We're nationals and act as nationals.<sup>39</sup>

The combining of personal elements must spring from within if there is to be any legitimate design to the ultimate pattern. Muddled interpersonal combinations are as significant as mud-pies, says Frost. It's not the combining, or socializing, that he is objecting to; it's the composition of the separate human elements that are forming the patterns. When the combining is of optimally developed individuals, then social organization is justified.

<sup>39</sup>Frost. "Build Soil" Ibid p. 425



How is optimum individual development achieved? Self-restraint is the necessary medium. Frost's poetic way of expressing his plan is to liken it to a farmer's enrichment of the soil. Turn the product back into the source to enrich it. Thoughts need further contemplation; soil needs further culture. If you harvest, without first having made good subsoil, your crop must perforce be superficial. The world will harry one to dance to its economic tune, but Frost advises strong resistance to this temptation. Hold firm, and build soil.

His motto is: "Keep off each other and keep each other off."<sup>40</sup> Take time to develop. Don't be forever shoving your half-baked product out into the indiscriminate world. That's the reason why quality is so rare. Maturity has been sacrificed by short-sighted socializers. If their aim is truly to improve society, then they should make haste a little more slowly, remembering that fools can rush in anytime. Frost summarizes his convictions thus:

We congregate embracing from distrust  
As much as love, and too close in to strike  
And be so very striking. Steal away  
The song says. Steal away and stay away.  
Don't join too many gangs. Join few if any.  
Join the United States and join the family--  
But not much in between unless a college.

. . . . .  
We're too unseparate. And going home<sup>41</sup>  
From company means coming to our senses.

<sup>40</sup>Frost, "Build Soil" Ibid p 30

<sup>41</sup>Ibid p. 450





Frost, of course, has exemplified in his own life this withdrawing from society's mass formations in order that his social contributions may not be narrow when he adds himself to the world. His particular manner of measuring distance by the common denominator of a human being, kin to every other human being on the face of the earth, has given his mature reflections a universality of appeal. What ails the people of New Hampshire is what ails the people everywhere. The characteristic twang of Frost's presentation is no barrier to understanding according to French<sup>42</sup>, German<sup>43</sup> and Russian critics<sup>44</sup>. In his own quaint way, he is international in the manner in which he wishes to be international. Van Wyck Brooks saw him in this light:

A boy and a sage at once, Frost carried with him an aura as of infinite space and time. Yet so paternal was he, and so human, that many a younger writer felt about him as Gorky felt about Tolstoy, "I am not an orphan on the earth as long as this man lives on it." <sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup>Chamaillard, Revue Anglo-Americaine, Vol.X:5, p. 452-3

<sup>43</sup>Schwarz, Hochschule und Ausland Vol.13:3

<sup>44</sup>Thorp, American Issues op. cit. p. 742

<sup>45</sup>Brooks, op. cit. p. 543



## CHAPTER IV

## MAN AND REASON

We dance round ~~an~~ a ring and suppose,  
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.<sup>1</sup>

The outer aspects of Man in relation to Nature and Society having been considered, the next area of observation is that more intimate and tantalizing search for Truth which the inner Man is constantly trying to encircle. By virtue of his inherent makeup, Man is equipped with many weapons to storm Truth's stronghold; Reason, faith, emotion, intuition, revelation. A poet usually is blessed with a superior type of equipment. Robert Frost brings to the battle a mind that was early shorn of illusions by hardships. This, coupled with his impartial use of both reason and emotion, has led him to certain basic conclusions.

To some, the gnomic quality of his thought is commonplace.<sup>2</sup> If reiterating the age-old truths of the human race is charged against him as a fault, Frost is misjudged. True, "the best way out is always through" may seem uninspired, but he has weighed all carefully, and his maxims are those culled from thoughtful experience. He does not accept "good fences make good

<sup>1</sup>Frost, "Quantula", A Witness Tree, p.71

<sup>2</sup>Brenner, Ten Modern Poets, p.102



neighbors". He winnows the valuable from the chaff in the harvesting of men's knowledge for twentieth century use. His aim is to popularize the truths which he has discovered to be true for himself. As a whimsical preacher says for him:

For, dear me, why abandon a belief  
Merely because it ceases to be true.  
Cling to it long enough, and not a doubt  
It will turn true again, for so it goes.  
Most of the change we think we see in life  
Is due to truths being in and out of favor.<sup>3</sup>

Sticking to Truth has kept Frost from dazzling the world with amazing conjectures. He has restrained himself:

"More than once I should have lost my soul to radicalism, if it had been the originality it was mistaken for by its young converts."<sup>4</sup> Reason has been his touchstone, helping him evaluate experience. His poetic progress has been marked by more and more attention to the Secret at the center of life.

Since reasoning is inference based on a consideration of data or premises, the first step is the accumulation of pertinent material. Experience is essential. Patient observation is necessary, with no pre-conceived notions present to bias the outcome. To many, some of Frost's poems appear to be naught but sensitively recorded

<sup>3</sup>Frost, "The Black Cottage", Collected Poems of Robert Frost,  
p. 77

<sup>4</sup>Frost, quoted in Fire and Ice, p. 3





happenings of the moment, the ulterior significance<sup>6</sup> of which is overlooked. The accurate observations of life's manifestations provide the only incontestable basis for reasoning about man's place in this world. "A Star in a Stone Boat" illustrates his painstaking method.

The possibility that a star might have fallen to earth and been used in a stonewall by an unknowing laborer intrigues Frost, who now watches intently for it:

From following walls I never lift my eye  
Except at night to places in the sky  
Where showers of charted meteors let fly.

Some may know what they seek in school and  
church,  
And why they seek it there; for what I search  
I must go measuring stone walls, perch on  
perch; <sup>5</sup>

The settled patterns of reason which have resulted in School and Church do not suffice for the poet who feels obliged to discover for himself, as far as possible, the significance of life. Should he ever gain his star:

Such as it is, it promises the prize  
Of the one world complete in any size  
That I am like to compass, fool or wise.<sup>6</sup>

His belief that the finite mind cannot encompass the infinite world has made him adopt a rather unglamorous middle-of-the-road position. He is willing to progress as far with reason as the data permit. Beyond

<sup>5</sup>Frost, "A Star in a Stone Boat", Ibid, p. 214

<sup>6</sup>Frost, Ibid, p. 215



that, he is an agnostic. Some days, he ventures a little farther than others, so that an occasional inconsistency appears. Actually, close study of his poetry reveals that when he has discovered new evidence, he adjusts his conclusions to fit the new premises. Always he is open-minded, waiting, watching, eager to advance, to push back the frontiers of the unknown. Nonetheless, he is unwilling to compromise with the enemy, and pretend that new premises have appeared when they have not. In his latest publication, he illustrates this:

The road at the top of the rise  
Seems to come to an end  
And take off into the skies.  
So at the distant bend

It seems to go into a wood,  
The place of standing still  
As long as the trees have stood.  
But say what fancy will,

The mineral drops that explode  
To drive my tone of car  
Are limited to the road.  
They deal with near and far,

But have almost nothing to do  
With the absolute flight and rest  
The universal blue  
And local green suggest.<sup>7</sup>

This exasperating allegiance to the finite compass of his reason restrains Frost from taking the leap to Plato's star. He sings admiringly of the reckless

<sup>7</sup>Frost, "The Middledness of the Road", The Virginia Quarterly Review, Vol.22, p. 3



courage of thought:

.. Thought has a pair of dauntless wings...

Thought cleaves the interstellar gloom  
And sits in Sirius' disc all night,  
Till day makes him retrace his flight,  
With smell of burning on every plume,  
Back past the sun to an earthly room.<sup>8</sup>

Note that the attractiveness of unbridled Thought soaring to infinite heights does not blind him to the "burning" price that man must pay when he sacrifices his known truths for unprovable possibilities. Carl Van Doren in speaking of Robert Frost says that his is the voice of reason; "it walks, not flies."<sup>9</sup> The idealism of Plato is alluring, but Frost will not succumb. This trait of his caused Alfred Kreymborg to remark: "His integrity with himself is absolute; he listens to no other voice."<sup>10</sup>

The tight rein which Frost keeps on his strong desire to know is succinctly portrayed in "For Once, Then Something". Superficially, this tells a pretty summer's tale of peering down a well to see below the surface of the water and his own reflection. Once he did see more than just his own cloud-encircled portrait, but the glimpse was too fleeting to provide a sturdy premise as to its identity. Actually, he was searching there, as well as in stone walls for the star of Truth. His rational intellect restrains

<sup>8</sup>Frost, "Bond and Free", Ibid. p. 151

<sup>9</sup>Van Doren, quoted in -Untermeyer, Poetry Since 1900, p. 29

<sup>10</sup>Kreymborg, Our Singing Strength, p. 331





-him from deducing anything on such slender evidence,  
 but the experience has broadened his outlook. "For Once,  
 Then, Something":

Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs  
 Always wrong to the light, so never seeing  
 Deeper down in the well than where the water  
 Gives me back in a shining surface picture  
 Me myself in the summer heaven godlike  
 Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs.  
Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,  
 I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,  
 Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,  
 Something more of the depths -- and then I lost  
 it.

Water came to rebuke the too clear water.  
 One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple  
 Shook whatever it was lay there at the bottom,  
 Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that  
 whiteness?

Truth? a pebble of quartz? For once, then, something.

11

Having had this flashing intuition of what may have been  
 Truth in pure essence, Frost cherishes this experience,  
 which keeps him from enthusiastically joining the ranks  
 of the materialists. Had his experience been more convinc-  
 ing, more lengthy, he might be found in the ranks of the  
 idealists. Often this limiting basis of epistemology as  
 he interprets man's capacity to see beyond immediate  
 sensations has caught him up short just as he was on the  
 verge of discovery. This feeling that imminent revelation  
 is just out of reach is expressed in:

11 Frost, "For Once, Then, Something", Collected Poems of  
 Robert Frost, p. 276



Heaven gives its glimpse only to those  
Not in a position to look too close.<sup>12</sup>

To Frost, the courage required to admit that one has not quite grasped a mystery is of a finer quality than that which bounds over the difficulty to the waiting tranquillity. He listens with interest to the elaborate bridges built over and around the mystery. His creed, "The best way is always through", wants to penetrate to the heart of the unknowable. Realizing that ... this is impossible as far as his observation in this world has led him to believe, he will not be wily. Ambiguity of language is not to be his refuge. Rather an attitude of:

There may be a little or much beyond the grave,  
But the strong are saying nothing until they  
see.<sup>13</sup>

The strong are daring to be silent, recognizing their own limitations, but cowardice is not one of them.

What of those who are saying something, who think they see answers here? Frost pays them the compliment of attention. "I myself, since forty," he tells, "have had a great leaning toward the philosophy department, but you know that's just letting all my prejudices out: my admiration for philosophy." Observation of every possible activity is his basis for thinking; the history of

<sup>12</sup>Frost, "A Passing Glimpse", Ibid. p. 311

<sup>13</sup>Frost, "The Strong are Saying Nothing", Ibid. p. 391



philosophy is just one of the many human activities he has closely examined. He pays tribute to both the Platonic and Aristotelian systems:

Greatest of all attempts to say one thing in terms of another is the philosophical attempt to say matter in terms of spirit or spirit in terms of matter, to make the final unity. That is the greatest attempt that ever failed. <sup>14</sup>

Obviously, he feels unable to subscribe completely to either idealism or materialism, since both are magnificent failures.

He finds error in both conclusions. The turning away from the beauties of this world as advocated by Plato, and taught by the Christian church, seems a waste to Frost, who has so many senses which particularly delight in them. Platonism seems to him to be unsuited to the world as he has experienced it. He once wrote to Robert Coffin, who was preparing a lecture on him and E.A. Robinson, a pointed explanation of the manner in which they differed in their idealism:

I am not the Platonist Robinson was. By Platonist I mean one who believes what we have here is an imperfect copy of what is in heaven. The woman you have is an imperfect copy of some woman in heaven or in someone else's bed. Many of the world's greatest -- maybe all of them -- have been ranged on that romantic side. I'm philosophically opposed to

<sup>14</sup>Frost, "Education by Poetry", Amherst Graduate Quarterly





having one Iseult for my vocation and another for my avocation; as you may have inferred from a poem called "Two Tramps in Mud Time". You see where that lands me. Mea culpa. Let me not sound the least bit smug. I define a difference with proper humility. A truly gallant Platonist will remain a bachelor as Robinson did from unwillingness to reduce any woman to the condition of being used without being idealized.<sup>15</sup>

Granted ~~that~~ Frost is not a gallant Platonist, where does his quiet meditative whimsy lead him? Russell Blankenship asserts that Frost is nine-tenths realist. In merely reporting the facts uncolored by prejudice or preconceived interpretations, Frost is so much of a realist that "his deep insight into the significance of a fact or episode . can hardly be called philosophy." <sup>16</sup> This extreme viewpoint has some basis, for Frost himself has said: "A poet must lean hard on facts, so hard, sometimes, that they hurt."<sup>17</sup> Louis Untermeyer is of the opinion that to Frost, "nothing is so rounded, so satisfying as the fact; it is the consummation of his art."<sup>18</sup> A large group of critics agree that the cautious use of reason has led Frost to the fold of the material realists. For instance, Ludwig Lewisohn summarized the poet's attitude in three words, "Reality must suffice." <sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Coffin, op cit. p. 46

<sup>16</sup>Blankenship, "The Realist", American Literature, p. 223

<sup>17</sup>Cox, op.cit. p. 109

<sup>18</sup>Untermeyer, American Poetry since 1900, p. 16

<sup>19</sup>Lewisohn, op.cit. p. 499



This wide -spread opinion represents but half the truth. His poems are accurate accounts of experience. "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening" is a realistic report of a winter storm. Many readers discover nothing more in the enchanting scene than the beauty revealed by Frost's seeing eyes. For the superficial reader, this suffices. The critics who either miss or ignore the deeper implications classify Frost as an earth-bound realist. Wider and deeper acquaintance with his thought leads to other conclusions.

Gorham Munson has conscientiously devoted himself to expanding the range of Frost's interpretation in a study devoted to the poet's common sense aspect and his contrasting sensibility. It is the former which has misled so many critics, including Amy Lowell,<sup>20</sup> into their false position. A brief resume of Munson's investigation will be of value here in discerning Frost's true position. When the poet says, "Me for the hills where I don't have to choose,"<sup>21</sup> he provides the key to his outlook. He is simplifying life by accepting it as composed of two types of reality. He is, therefore, a dualist.

The end reached by observation as method...  
is dualism -- that is a set of axioms and

<sup>20</sup>Lowell, Tendencies in American Poetry, p. 136

<sup>21</sup>Frost, "New Hampshire", Collected Poems of Robert Frost,  
p. 210



laws founded on distinctions. The distinctions are based on appearances and both they and appearances are treated as reasonably final data. ...At any rate, whether or not the real world is dualistic, certainly the apparent world is. <sup>22</sup>

Munson believes that it is reason that has led Frost to avoid extremes in what he accepts and what he rejects. Frost's sensibilities are too keen to be denied as non-existent; therefore he will not be an idealist. He will try to grasp as comprehensively as he can this material world of fact. He will exult in the rain; he will split the stars; he will watch the snow. At the same time, he will not in his practical acceptance of facts go to the other extreme of materialism.

Something inscrutable and ordering very likely remains; there are overtones in the observer of the fact that he cannot ignore. Thus, he neither denies God nor the world; he accepts the latter as demonstrated and the former as probable or at least possible. <sup>23</sup>

Munson is certainly <sup>more</sup> aware of the true import of Frost's attitude than many of his fellow-critics. Even in A Boy's Will, dualism is expressed by these lines:

However it is in some other world  
I know that this is the way in ours. <sup>24</sup>

In a recent volume, A Witness Tree, he shows again that the same dualistic line has held him all his life:

<sup>22</sup>Munson, Robert Frost: A Study in Sensibility and Common Sense,

<sup>23</sup>Ibid,

<sup>24</sup>Frost, "In Hardwood Groves", Collected Poems of Robert Frost, p. 37





It were unworthy of the tongue  
To let the half of life alone <sup>25</sup>

Munson's conclusion is in tune with Frost's expressed poetic thoughts. The evidence obtainable proved the validity of Munson's final analysis:

What he does trust is his own experience (having good sense he knows that there is nothing else to trust) and his own experience happens in Frost's case to be mediatory in character. Being intelligent, being deeply emotional, being obliged to make terms with practical life, the man of good sense casts up a rough balance of the three aspects of his life and travels ... in the center of the highway.<sup>26</sup>

This evaluation of Frost as a Golden Mean thinker is the conclusion which any critic who reads him long, and carefully will reach. Frost uses himself as the center of his universe, in an oddly objective way. He believes that what is true for him is true for humanity. As was quoted before, "'way down inside I'm personal". <sup>27</sup>; this self-integrity is what gives consistency to his thought. Early in life, he closed his ears to other influences. For instance, just when he had decided to leave Dartmouth, he wrote:

Now close the windows and hush all the fields:  
If the trees must, let them silently toss;  
No bird is singing now, and if there is,  
Be it my loss.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup>Frost, A Witness Tree, p. 20

<sup>26</sup>Munson, op. cit.

<sup>27</sup>Frost, "Build Soil", Collected Poems of Robert Frost, p. 425

<sup>28</sup>Frost, "Now Close the Window", Ibid. p. 36



That which he has allowed to influence him has been chosen, insofar as it was humanly possible. He has exercised his reason and will and where they have not proven sufficient to turn the tide as he desired, he has been practical enough to assign it to causes beyond man's power. In which case, neither pessimism nor optimism over-ride his Golden Mean restraint. He has a little of each to keep him normal. A perfect example of his "Winesap Humor", as Christopher Morley calls it, is "In Time of Cloudburst". The inquiring Mind of Frost goes out in every direction on this occasion, turning over evolution, dualism, hope, despair and world design.

Let the downpour roil and toil!  
The worst it can do to me  
Is carry some garden soil  
A little nearer the sea.

'Tis the world-old way of the rain  
When it comes to a mountain farm  
To exact for a present gain  
A little of future harm.

And the harm is none too sure,  
For when all that was rotted rich  
Shall be in the end scoured poor,  
When my garden has gone down the ditch,

Some force has but to apply,  
And summits shall be immersed,  
The bottom of seas raised dry --  
The slope of earth reversed.

Then all I need do is run  
To the other end of the slope,  
And on tracts laid new to the sun,  
Begin all over <sup>2</sup>agin to hope.



Some worn old tool of my own  
 Will be turned up by the plow,  
 The wood of it changed to stone,  
 But as ready to ~~wield~~ as now.

May my application so close  
 To so endless a repetition  
 Not make me tired and morose  
 And resentful of man's condition.<sup>29</sup>

Note how he used the fact of the storm as his starting point; his own personal point of view for his direction tendency; and the combination of the two produced this universal application of the necessity of the acceptance of man's lot. Passive resignation is not his message, but understanding one's own limitations is the first step in wisdom.

This idea is quite elaborately presented in a character-sketch, "Wild Grapes". A small tom-boy once went to gather grapes with her brother. The elusive grapes had entwined themselves about young birches, quite out of reach of the younger child. Bending down a tree, the brother planned to help her get her share. When he took his weight away, the girl went sailing skyward, unable to keep her footing. Regaining solid ground would have been easy if she had dared let go her grip. Not daring, she clung, until her brother again applied his weight to swing her down. This would not be a masterly poem were it not

<sup>29</sup>Frost, "In Time of Cloudburst", Ibid., p369





for its conclusion:

It wasn't my not weighing anything  
 So much as my not knowing anything --  
 My brother had been nearer right before.  
 I had not taken the first step in knowledge;  
 I had not learned to let go with the hands,  
 As still I have not learned to do with the heart;  
 And have no wish to do with the heart, nor need,  
 That I can see. The mind-- is not the heart.  
 I may yet live, as I know others live,  
 To wish in vain to let go with the mind --  
 Of cares, at night, to sleep; but nothing tells me  
 That I need to learn to let go with the heart.<sup>30</sup>

Letting go with the mind when a problem is insoluble by human reason makes for adjustment in this world of contradictory facts. If one ponders unceasingly on Life's whys and wherefors, he will find himself reasoning in circles about a mystery that only sits tantalizingly in the middle; as Frost puts it at the beginning of this chapter, "The Secret ...knows."

Omniscience is not claimed by this good Greek who lives in New England. If there is mystery in his poems, Mark Van Doren says, it is "simply the mystery which there is in existence."<sup>31</sup> One of the greatest concepts is the idea of permanence in transiency. To say that the only lasting thing is change is more puzzling than revealing to unphilosophical minds. "West-running Brook" is a three-page presentation of just this aspect of human existence, time

<sup>30</sup>Frost, "Wild Grapes", Ibid., p.243

<sup>31</sup>Van Doren, "The Permanence of Robert Frost", The American Scholar, Vol.5, p.195



and eternity. In the brook a black rock juts up, so that a white wave forever is breaking over it. Actually, the elements composing the wave at any given moment are the next instant whirled downstream. Nonetheless, the wave is always there; the resistance of the rock is always there; that's the permanence of it. The running away of the water into another form (brook) is the change. Life, says Frost, is like that: our energies assume one form today to battle against the rock of chaos; our victories are fleeting, but the resistance by many is eternal. There is some strong motivating force in man's existence:

It has this throwing backward on itself  
 So that the fall of most of it is always  
 Raising a little, sending up a little.  
 Our life runs down in sending up the clock.  
 The brook runs down in sending up our life.  
 The sun runs down in sending up the brook.  
 And there is something sending up the sun.<sup>32</sup>

The vital energy of life is spent in achieving a small amount of form (here the wave) with tremendous waste involved. So little is accomplished with even double efforts. The aim of energy is the creation of significant form before the energy is diverted to other channels. No life is a failure that continues to try to resolve the difficulties, before the energy runs down to death.

Even Frost's own thought shows change and

<sup>32</sup>Frost, "West-running Brook", *ibid.* p. 329



permanence: the change is flexibility if a new idea is worthy of inclusion; the permanence is his cautious, critical, shrewd attitude. Sometimes, he laughs at himself because he tries to encompass so many truths that oftentimes seem almost mutually antagonistic. Both materialists and idealists have ideas which Frost delights in holding. Making his lion and lamb thoughts lie down together once provoked him to picture himself in the fashion:

For every parcel I stoop down to seize,  
I lose some other off my arms and knees,  
And the whole pile is slipping, bottles, buns,  
Extremes too hard to comprehend at once,  
Yet nothing I should care to leave behind.  
With all I have to hold with, hand and mind  
And heart, if need be, I will do my best  
To keep their building balanced at my breast.  
I crouch down to prevent them as they fall;  
Then I sit down in the middle of them all.  
I had to drop the armful in the road  
And try to stack them in a better load.<sup>33</sup>

Being a Golden Mean philosopher, he keeps his sense of humor busy maintaining the proper perspective on the possible extremes that unrestrained enthusiasm might glamorize into the appearance of Truth.

His playful humor, that is no respecter of dignity in any form, pervades all his poetry. With him, the way of understanding, he says, is partly mirth. He agrees with Plato: "Serious things cannot be understood

<sup>33</sup>Frost, "The Armful", Ibid. p. 343





without laughable things, not opposites at all without opposites, if a man is really to have intelligence of either." The two short poems quoted earlier in this chapter: "The Armful", above, and "For Once, Then, Something" have each united opposites that with less skillful handling would be ludicrous. His aim is hardly ever merely to amuse. He uses humor, irony, satire to sharpen the distinctions he is presenting. Purists may find him flip-pant, but the composition of life is such a similar crazy-quilt of the inconsequential and the ponderous that Frost's witty combinations of incongruities seem far more right than wrong. Clarification is the result. "Build Soil" with its light sure touch contains more deep, worthwhile thinking about politics than all the Presidential messages to Congress for the last decade. God-like humor is one of his finest assets; he realizes its necessity.

..style is the way the man takes himself; and to be at all charming or even bearable, the way is almost rigidly prescribed. If it is with outer seriousness, it must be with inner humor. If it is with outer humor, it must be with inner seriousness. Neither one alone without the other will do. 34

When there is an unexpected twist of humor, it invariably is hiding a soul-stirring thought. This ability to encompass extremes in such a manner as to reconcile them by

34Frost, "Introduction" to King Jasper, p. xiii



pervasive gentle laughter is perfectly illustrated in "To a Young Wretch". Without permission, a thoughtless lad has cut one of Frost's evergreen trees for his Christmas tree. Frost's natural resentment is balanced against the boy's thrill of conquest:

It is your Christmases against my woods.  
But even where thus apposing interests kill,  
They are to be thought of as opposing goods  
Oftener than conflicting good and ill;  
Which makes the war god seem no special dunce  
For always fighting on both sides at once.<sup>35</sup>

Having surveyed the paths that reason has led man to follow, Frost has arrived at some very definite conclusions. Patient, conscientious observations have been the basis for deductions. The extent of his ventures is the philosophy of dualism. In this system, both apparent and unseen realities have validity. The Golden Mean coincides best with his bulky experience, although the answers are not absolutes. Perfect understanding is denied man; Frost is unperturbed by this limit. He writes:

I have never voted either ticket. If there is a universal unfitness and unconformity as of a buttoning so started that every button on the vest is in the wrong button hole at the top and the one naked button at the bottom so far apart they have no hope of getting together, I don't care to decide whether God did this for the fun of it or for the devil of it. The two expressions come to practically the same thing anyway.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup>Frost, Christmas card - quoted in Coffin, op.cit, p.136

<sup>36</sup>Coffin, op.cit. p. 146



Just as Frost refuses to be regionally limited in his outlook, so is he in his philosophy, being neither optimist nor pessimist, idealist nor materialist. He will continue to forever watch and hope, "wherever the truth may be."<sup>37</sup>

His maturity has shown a deepening of his youthful thoughts. His promise has been fulfilled; now his completion of early inspirations has won him the place of poet-seer that Emerson once held.<sup>38</sup> Stars have been a favorite symbol with Frost; with their aid, he has limned man's progress in this finite world with reason:

Young people have insight. They have a flash here and a flash there. It is like the stars coming out in the early evening. They have flashes of light. It is later in the dark of life that you see forms, constellations. And it is the constellations that are philosophy. The flashing is done; the coming out of the stars.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup>Frost, "Neither Out Far nor in Deep", Collected Poems of Robert Frost, p. 394

<sup>38</sup>Brooks, New England: Indian Summer, p. 530

<sup>39</sup>Frost, Biblia, Vol. LX, (unpaged)





## CHAPTER V

## MAN AND EMOTION

The rain to the wind said  
 'You push and I'll pelt.'  
 They so smote the garden bed  
 That the flowers actually knelt,  
 And lay lodged - though not dead.  
 I know how the flowers felt.<sup>1</sup>

The intensity of Robert Frost's emotion is as forcefully conveyed to his public as his reasoned skepticism. This statement is no more than superficially paradoxical, for in the constitution of every man are reason and emotion. The proportionate amount of each element is the individualizing factor. Reason and emotion are Siamese twins, always joined and inseparable. However, for purposes of discussion, the preceding chapter has emphasized the rational half of Frost's balance mechanism. Now to examine his emotions insofar as his poetry reveals them.

Lin Yutang once observed that the difference between a clever man and a dull fellow was that the former had a set of finer lenses by which he perceived a sharper image and retained it longer. Frost qualifies as clever because he brings into sharp focus the universal experiences of every man. An anonymous reviewer recognized this talent in Frost's first published volume:

<sup>1</sup> Frost, "Lodged", Ibid p. 315



One feels that this man has seen and felt:  
seen with a revelatory, a creative vision;  
felt personally and intensely.<sup>2</sup>

This statement was based on the emotion laden poems of Frost's youth. The authenticity of his emotion has been attested by his subsequent works, according to critical authorities. In 1931, James S. Wilson characterized it thus, "It is the genuineness of his feeling that keeps Frost from ever striking a false note."<sup>3</sup> A more detailed study has been made by Robert Coffin, who asserts:

He turns his back on the intellectual absolute, and finds a new kind of absolute in the art of being a common human being.<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary criticism is united in affirming the restrained genuineness of the emotion in this sensitive poet.

Frost has expressed his faith in the emotional, ' or unreasoning, faculty of man to divine hidden Truth. The emotional pathway, while alien to logic, nonetheless leads to truly significant conclusions. In his meditative monologue, "The Three Beliefs", he illustrates the penetrating power of the non-rational faculties. These beliefs are self-belief, love-belief, and art-belief. "The person who gets close enough to poetry," said Frost, "is going to know more about the word belief than anyone else knows." Self-belief is the inner conviction of the young, unproven individual that he will one day be important. At first it

<sup>2</sup>Anonymous review, The Academy Vol. 85:2159 p. 360

<sup>3</sup>Wilson, "In Human Terms", Virginia Quarterly Review  
Vol. 7:2 p. 316-320

<sup>4</sup>Coffin, op. cit. p.109



is phantasy, but it can become reality if the young man believes in himself long enough and hard enough. Love-belief is the expansion of this belief to include another person. Two separate entities believe that they may become one. If this faith becomes a reality, their love-belief has been justified. Art-belief is another type of investment in the unseen future. He writes:

Every time a poem is written, every time a short story is written it is written, not by cunning, but by belief. The beauty, the something, the little charm of the thing to be, is more felt than known.

The last phrase, "more felt than known" illustrates the primary importance which he attaches to the wells of emotion within man.<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes these emotions find ready channels for expression; sometimes circumstances demand that they be dammed. Both aspects are common in experience. Frost has written of each of these. In "The Most of It", he gives an unforgettable picture of poignant loneliness:

He thought he kept the universe alone;  
For all the voice in answer he could wake  
Was but the mocking echo of his own  
From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.  
Some morning from the boulder-broken beach  
He would cry out on life, that what it wants  
Is not its own love back in copy-speech,  
But counter love, original response.  
And nothing ever came of what he cried  
Unless it was the embodiment that crashed  
In the cliffs talus on the other side,  
And then in the far distant water splashed,

<sup>5</sup>Frost, "The Three Beliefs", quoted by Coffin in New Poetry of New England





But after a time allowed for it to swim,  
 Instead of proving human when it neared  
 And someone else additional to him,  
 As a great buck it powerfully appeared,  
 Pushing the crumpled water up ahead,  
 And landed pouring like a waterfall,  
 And stumbling through the rocks with horny tread,  
 And forced the underbrush -- and that was all.<sup>6</sup>

Man's emotional need of response is often unsatisfied.

Both human and environmental factors are responsible. Although the lonely woodsman is deprived of human companionship by his isolation, many city dwellers experience the same solitude. More than proximity is required.

Nor is all loneliness experienced in social relations.

Man is such a complex organism that he can even experience loneliness in his own being. In "Desert Places" Frost has developed the loneliness which can so easily surround those who are not actively seeking companionship. This imminent loneliness is more terrifying and desolate than remote interstellar space:

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces  
 Between stars -- on stars where no human race is.  
 I have it in me so much nearer home  
 To scare myself with my own desert places.<sup>7</sup>

Intensified loneliness may accompany grief, as in "Home Burial". The loss of an only son so separates his bereaved parents that the real tragedy becomes, not his death, but their estrangement. Even in the presence of love,

<sup>6</sup>Frost, "The Most of It", A Witness Tree, p. 23

<sup>7</sup>Frost, "Desert Places", op. cit. p. 386



the predominant emotions may be loneliness and grief. Many sentimentalists believe that love conquers all, but Frost is too realistic to accept this fallacy. He once said there were but two themes in this world: the hymns of joy or the threnodies of sorrow. The dominance of grief has overshadowed the love of the husband and wife.<sup>8</sup>

Still, Frost does not assert that grief is all-powerful. In one of his most characteristic pieces, he chides grief for its conceit that it has such a strong influence on man:

Grief may have thought it was grief.  
Care may have thought it was care.  
They were welcome to their belief,  
The over important pair.

No, it took all the snows that clung  
To the low roof over his bed,  
Beginning when he was young,  
To induce the one snow on his head.

.....  
Grief may have thought it was grief.  
Care may have thought it was care.  
But neither one was the thief  
Of his raven color of hair.<sup>9</sup>

One's head grays, not because of grief. but because time is inexorable. Grief is unavoidable, but does not have to be crushing. Man must accept his share, and go on. Frost once wrote that he particularly admired E. A. Robinson because the latter chose "griefs, not grievances" to write about.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Frost, "Home Burial" Ibid, p. 69

<sup>9</sup>Frost, "They Were Welcome to Their Belief", Ibid, p.390

<sup>10</sup> Frost, Introduction to King Jasper op. cit., p.vii



The meeting and facing of grief is, in Frost's opinion, as likely to add stature to a human being as the finest philosophical systematizations.

His own life is a good case in point. Rebuffs were his usual portion for the first thirty-seven years of his existence. Poverty was his constant companion. In his mother's and father's lives, disappointments were familiar accompaniments of their sojourn on earth. "The Lovely Shall be Choosers" was inspired by his mother's experiences.<sup>11</sup> Fate has often inexplicably rained blows on his head, as the rain belts down the flowers,<sup>12</sup> but defeat only momentarily holds the day, for Frost is well adjusted to this world, and can find things to cheer himself on the blackest day:

The way a crow  
Shook down on me  
The dust of snow  
From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart  
A change of mood  
And saved some part  
Of a day I had rued.<sup>13</sup>

By realizing that this is a world of compensations, he manages to maintain his Golden Mean in the realm of emotion. In "Fire and Ice", he demonstrates his just awe of its power.<sup>14</sup> A less familiar poem, "The Flood", likens man's emotions to the

<sup>11</sup>Frost, "The Lonely Shall be Choosers" Ibid, p.325

<sup>12</sup>Frost, "Lodged" Ibid, p.315

<sup>13</sup>Frost, "Dust of Snow" Ibid, p.270

<sup>14</sup>Frost, "Fire and Ice" Ibid, p.268





devastating power of unleashed water. Expression must be found for its pent-up intensity, and it usually recks not of its results.<sup>15</sup> He is not here advocating a lack of restraint on man's part. Rather, he is accepting the power of emotion to overthrow reason, and because he hates extremes in any form, he has no more fondness for unbridled emotion than he has for irresponsible rationalism.

Having previously admitted that he is neither pessimist nor optimist, Frost is not surprised by grief nor over-joyed by happiness. This point of view causes Robert Coffin to believe that Frost thinks there is a very definite pre-arranged pattern of destiny which is always prejudicèd just a trifle in favor of the good, rather than the destructive, elements.

Frost has a sense of the destiny of the human race. It isn't an elaborated schedule of improvements that the older New England poets subscribed to. We aren't due at the millenium, or any way-station this side ....And the most remarkable thing is that our destiny seems to be in the right direction, the direction of happiness.<sup>16</sup>

What has caused Frost to conclude that happiness is possible in this obviously imperfect world? Perhaps Emerson's statement may give us the answer; he thought that the crowning fortune of a man's life was to be born with a bias to some pursuit which provided both employment and

<sup>15</sup>Frost, "The Flood", Ibid, p.323

<sup>16</sup>Coffin, op. cit. p.113



happiness. Many people have too much employment and too little satisfaction. "A Servant to Servants" shows a mind slowly unhinging in just such a situation. Too much drudgery has made her almost incapable of attaining the necessary level of happiness:

It's got so I don't even know for sure  
Whether I am glad, sorry, or anything.  
There's nothing but a voice-like left inside  
That seems to tell me how I ought to feel,  
And would feel if I wasn't all gone wrong.<sup>17</sup>

Finding the work that is congenial gives form and satisfaction to daily activity. In both "Mowing" <sup>18</sup> and "Two Tramps in Mud Time" <sup>19</sup> which he sub-titles "A Full-time Interest", he indicates exactly where happiness may be found.

For him, the soil and the growing things of earth answer heart-felt needs. He confesses himself "Slave to a springtime passion for the earth." <sup>20</sup> He loves it ardently; many of his pleasantest experiences have their basis here. Unfortunately, people do not avail themselves of nature's loveliness. It is no wonder, then, that they find fewer things to be happy about than does Frost. When one sets about developing the finer perceptions that Lin Yutang recommends, the area for observation should contain objects worthy of consideration. Perhaps this is

<sup>17</sup>Frost, "A Servant to Servants", Ibid, p.82

<sup>18</sup>Frost, "Mowing", Ibid, p.25

<sup>19</sup>Frost, "Two Tramps in Mud Time", Ibid, p.357

<sup>20</sup>Frost, "Putting in the Seed" Ibid, p.155



one of the reasons why Frost limited himself to New England for many years. It was Hawthorne who wrote: "New England is quite as large a lump of earth as my heart can really take in." Generally speaking, Frost may be said to agree with him. New England contains ample scope for the observations of the seasons, and man denies his birthright when he lives in artificial environments. For Frost, New England has no monopoly on the seasons; any rural community that was inherently beautiful, would serve his needs. His A Further Range declares this.

Love of nature is of secondary importance; human love is of primary significance. It is this that Frost balances over against intellect. He is too wise to discard either guide to life on earth. Human love is that which makes this existence most worthwhile. The main reason why he would not wish to be swung right out of this world while swinging on a birch is because he is unwilling to part with love:

Earth's the right place for love:  
I don't know where it's likely to go better.<sup>21</sup>

His natural reticence and his axiomatic Golden Mean keep him from being sentimental or embarrassingly autobiographical. The unmistakable sincerity of his love poems, however, does

<sup>21</sup>Frost, "Birches", Ibid p.153





reveal a well-controlled emotion, worthy of the lady known as his Muse. So often, the meaning is conveyed by what is not said. But as one critic has observed:

The reader gradually realizes that what the speakers leave unspoken does not really need to be spoken, for the lacunae are apparent only, not real, and a sympathetic mind can follow the thinking.<sup>22</sup>

A perfect example of this type of transference is "Moon Compasses" which ends with this last line.

So love will take between the hands a face ...<sup>23</sup>

Obviously, more is intended than expressed.

Not all his convictions about love are veiled. Sometimes he seems to treat it as if it were as fundamental as the sun and moon.<sup>23</sup> Again, it is too ethereal for daily fare.<sup>24</sup> Most often, it is the saving happiness that makes a drab day worth living. It gives meaning to a little walk. For instance, he tells of pausing to enjoy a view of a valley, when his unwon beloved unexpectedly appears on the path. No more words are spent in describing the view. The more important consideration of their yet unexpressed love commands his attention. The rest of his walk is pleasant because he passes what she previous to meeting him had passed.<sup>25</sup>

In describing "The Telephone", one must be

<sup>22</sup>Newdick, "Frost's Other Harmony", Sewanee Rev. Vo.XLVIII p. 413

<sup>23</sup>Frost "Moon Compasses" Ibid, p.393

<sup>24</sup>Frost, "To Earthward" Ibid, p.279

<sup>25</sup>Frost, "Meeting and Passing" Ibid p.148



careful not to use heavy phrases. Frost apparently is being fanciful, but his underlying thought is the conveyance of the perfect love between two people who can communicate across the miles simply because they are absolutely in tune.<sup>26</sup> Love is as important a factor in his philosophy as intellect, and it is reassuring to find such a talent affirming the universal convictions of humanity. Lasting poetry in any language repeats this theme. The unique idiom of Frost's love-poetry has evolved as he, himself, has searched the many manifestations of human love to be found in this world.

His understanding of its power and significance has deepened with maturity and experience. He is, as he early prophesied, only more sure of his youthful presentiments. In youth he found love intoxicating, almost overpowering. He found it possible to live on air. His appreciations were so keen that a rose petal could stimulate him almost unbearably.

Love at the lips was touch  
 As sweet as I could bear;  
 And once that seemed too much;  
 I lived on air  
 . . . . .  
 I craved strong sweets, but those  
 Seemed strong when I was young;  
 The petal of the rose  
 It was that stung.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Frost, "The Telephone", Ibid p.147

<sup>27</sup>Frost. "To Earthward" op. cit. p.279



Subsequently he learned that love is associated with pain as well as pleasure and that each experience has its own value. He has extracted the bitter from that which formerly yielded only sweet. But his all-encompassing wisdom enabled him to reconcile these incongruities into a coherent pattern.

The permanence of love, which incorporates both wanted and unwanted changes, and yet remains itself is likened by him to the beach of the sea:

The heart can think of no devotion  
Greater than being shore to the ocean --  
Holding the curve of one position,  
Counting an endless repetition.<sup>28</sup>

This integrity of Love inspires loyalty in the beloved. Mutual trust is a strong refuge which cannot be destroyed. The discoverers of the West-running Brook managed to underwrite their mortal love with immortality when they became aware they were joined to each other and to the cosmos in an unbroken continuity.<sup>29</sup> Such all-important relationships, Frost thinks are dependent on man's perception and will. One may live a lifetime and never experience the warm emotion of "belonging" that "Two Look at Two" inspired in the hearts of the individuals involved.<sup>30</sup> Satisfaction is within the reach of every man, for each was

<sup>28</sup>Frost, "Devotion", Ibid, p.308

<sup>29</sup>Frost, "West-running Brook", Ibid p.327 op.cit.

<sup>30</sup>Frost, "Two Look at Two", Ibid, p.282





originally endowed with intellect enough to puzzle about time and space. The value of this intellect, which is capable of lightning-like penetration, is knowing when to dethrone it and exalt Love. Man achieves his highest development when he realizes that activity is not progress, and that he can gain more by listening than by ceaseless inquiry. This blissful peace may be secured by any worthy loving pair who forswear the vanities of this earth. This self-directed pace is called the "master speed" by Frost:

Two such as you with such a master speed  
 Cannot be parted nor be swept away  
 From one another once you are agreed  
 That life is only life forevermore  
 Together wing to wing and oar to oar.<sup>31</sup>

This idea that the heart is as trustworthy a guide as the head is one of Frost's most positive convictions. Ruling out sentimentality, because its excesses automatically debar it from inclusion in his Golden Mean-governed philosophy, one is yet correct in deducing that this poet advocates following the dictates of one's heart as often as being guided by the shrewdness of calculation. The preceding chapter has established the value which Frost places on reason as a guide; He values emotion as of equal importance. Truth includes both of them, and so also must

<sup>31</sup>Frost, "Wild Grapes", Ibid, p.243



any lasting solution of any social problem. The favor of the world has fluctuated from one to the other. For a clear definition of their individual attributes, he has written "Wild Grapes".

In this whimsical little narrative of a small tomboy and her brother, Frost has revealed his evaluation of the respective importance of the heart and mind. The little girl found herself unable to hold the wild grape vines which her brother had bent down to her. Instead they recoiled skyward, carrying her with them. She clung to the vines, stubbornly refusing to release her grasp. This little incident is the occasion for Frost's fine musing on the mind and heart:

It wasn't my not weighing anything  
 So much as my not knowing anything --  
 .....  
 I had not taken the first step in knowledge:  
 I had not learned to let go with the hands,  
 As still I have not learned to with the heart,  
 And have no wish to with the heart -- nor need,  
 That I can see. The mind -- is not the heart.  
 I may yet live, as I know others live,  
 To wish in vain to let go with the mind --  
 Of cares, at night, to sleep; but nothing tells me  
 That I need learn to let go with the heart.<sup>32</sup>

Frost has by nature been one to hold people with his heart. He has the gift of friendship.<sup>33</sup> His affections overflowed his family circle to include innumerable friends.

<sup>32</sup> Frost, "Wild Grapes", Ibid, p.243

<sup>33</sup> Coffin, op. cit. p.26



This wealth of affection he has bestowed lavishly on individual members of the human race. He is not a humanitarian in the usual sense of the word. He does not like his feelings of fellowship to be organized and exploited; rather, he prefers individual opportunities for human contact. In "A Roadside Stand", he regrets that "greedy good-doers" are taking over the functions that kind-hearted men should individually perform for the less fortunate.<sup>34</sup>

Friendship for him is a responsibility. Its caliber is determined by the amount of emotion that the moral character of the individual arouses. For instance, true friendship would never be inspired by canting, self-centered Brother Meserve.<sup>35</sup> How much more easily the unknown reaper who left the tuft of flowers uncut aroused love and friendship.<sup>36</sup> As a final indication of the character-affection ratio, Frost offers as proof a list of friends he acquired in New Hampshire: Hall, Gay, Bartlett, Harris and Lynch and the reason for it:

I hadn't an illusion in my handbag  
About the people being better there  
Than those I left behind. I thought they weren't.  
I thought they couldn't be. And yet they were.<sup>37</sup>

These people were finer friends than he had had elsewhere, because they were intrinsically finer people

<sup>34</sup>Frost, "A Roadside Stand", Ibid, p.370, op.cit.

<sup>35</sup>Frost, "Snow", Ibid, p.180

<sup>36</sup>Frost, "The Tuft of Flowers", Ibid, p.31

<sup>37</sup>Frost, "New Hampshire", Ibid, p.207





Friends are necessary to the happiness of all normal human beings. Frost, through his poetry, has been a friend to many who have never had the opportunity of knowing him personally. He has directed many to the several paths to happiness that he, himself, has discovered. He has kept his heart open for all legitimate emotional experiences, never shrinking from his share. Despite the many griefs he has borne, he nevertheless is confident that there is more to rejoice about in this world than to sorrow over. He does not say that every single day of grief is balanced by another day of joy; rather, he says that the high quality of happiness is impressive enough to counteract the larger portion of trouble. Those who think him a grim poet have not understood this particular tenet of his thought.

In "Happiness Makes Up in Height For What It Lacks in Length", he has likened sorrow to the many stormy days which shrouded his world most of one season. His impression of the season, however, is not a gray one at all, because one day's perfect weather diffused an amazing amount of sunlight and warmth over the whole period. That one perfect day was enough to change completely his impression of the season.<sup>38</sup> In the same manner, a little

<sup>38</sup>Frost, "Happiness Makes Up in Height For What It Lacks in Length", Ibid, p.439



can redeem a vast amount of unhappiness. Just having someone to love, Frost believes, can give you confidence in the value of this existence. Not infrequently, love can clarify that which defies reason.

Frost is wise in using both emotion and reason as guides to understanding the complexities of life. Each has its own areas of investigation and one who would learn as much as possible of reality must use them as supplements to each other. "Bond and Free" illustrates the simultaneous operation of these two forces:

Love has earth to which she clings  
With hills and circled arms about --  
Wall within wall to shut fear out.  
But Thought has need of no such things,  
For Thought has a pair of dauntless wings.

On snow and sand and turf, I see  
Where Love has left a printed trace  
With straining in the world's embrace.  
And such is Love and glad to be.  
But Thought has shaken his ankles free.

Thought cleaves the interstellar gloom  
And sits in Sirius' disc all night,  
Till day makes him retrace his flight,  
With smell of burning on every plume,  
Back past the sun to an earthly room.

His gains in heaven are what they are.  
Yet some say Love by being thrall  
And simply staying possesses all  
In several beauty that Thought fares far  
To find fused in another star.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup>Frost, "Bond and Free", Ibid, p.151



## CHAPTER VI

### MAN AND GOD

God once spoke to people by name.  
 The sun once imparted its flame.  
 One impulse persists as our breath;  
 The other persists as our faith.<sup>1</sup>

Frost's latest volume, "A Masque of Reason" is concerned with the problem that all thinking men exert themselves most intently to solve. Sometimes, the desire for an acceptable answer is so strong that it forces a solution which is really untenable in the light of experience and reason. Those who are able to control their inquiries are constantly on the alert for new evidence, or else for a new viewpoint by which to evaluate present evidence. What is God's relationship to man is the question.

Frost's most significant utterances are concerned with this aspect of man's life. He is most worthy of the name of philosopher in his later years, which have been increasingly devoted to analyzing the information which he has accumulated in his advanced maturity. "You know," he said in this writer's hearing, "I am much more concerned about God and me, than I ever used to be." Since he accompanied this statement with

<sup>1</sup>Frost, "Sitting By a Bush in Broad Sunlight", Ibid, p.342





a gentle smile, one could tell that he was not worried about possible damnation, but was speaking from a philosophical point of view. The recent "Astrometaphysical" develops this line.<sup>2</sup>

Lord, I have loved your sky,  
Be it said against or for me,  
Have loved it clear and high,  
Or low and stormy;

Till I have reeled and stumbled  
From looking up too much,  
And fallen and been humbled  
To wear a crutch.

My love for every Heaven  
O'er which you, Lord, have lorded,  
From number One to Seven  
Should be rewarded.

I should not dare to hope  
That when I am translated  
My scalp will in the cope  
Be constellated.

But if that seems to tend  
To my undue renown,  
At least you ought to send  
Me up, not down.

He realizes that his tendency toward philosophy has been strenthening, and even rallies himself a little in "Build Soil", when he begs his companion,

Let me preach to you, will you Meliboeus?

And Meliboeus replies:

Preach on. I thought you were already preaching.  
But preach and see if I can tell the difference.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Frost, "Astrometaphysical", Virginia Quarterly Review p.4

<sup>3</sup>Frost, "Build Soil", Ibid, p.427



In "The Lesson for Today", the title, itself, reveals his serious turn of thought. It is concerned deeply with the life above and with the life that may be beyond this life.

How has his thought developed, so that it now has so definite a flavor of "preaching"? It started for him in his own personal experiences with this world. For any realist, Truth must begin there. In his first book, he wrote about the leaves falling from the trees in the autumn. These leaves' purpose is to provide the strength for other leaves to grow another year. Flowers will also benefit by the leaves' extinction. On the basis of this observation, Frost was not then ready to affirm that human death is necessary for the continuation of other human lives:

However it is in some other world  
I know that this is the way in ours.<sup>4</sup>

All that he felt sure about was that the leaves die to produce others. He did not feel that the experience had taught him anything valid about another world.

This cautious accumulation of experience over the years and his unwillingness to state a conclusion until time had proved to his satisfaction that Truth was in it was probably fostered in Frost by his own disgust toward pious scalawags whose conclusions on insufficient evidence

<sup>4</sup>Frost, "In Hardwood Groves", Ibid, p.37



aroused his scorn. Brother Meserve is an example of the type of man that Frost would not allow himself to be. One must have extensive experience, both good and bad, and then one may decide about Man and God. Meserve, for instance, intended to use his journey through the snow as an example of God's protection:

"He's getting up a miracle this minute.  
Privately--to himself, right now, he's thinking  
He'll make a case of it if he succeeds,  
But keep still if he fails." 5

Such a willful concealment of the evidence infuriates Frost. He wants the whole story. If man tampers with the evidence, and is not whole-hearted in his worrying about the problem, some such result as this will ensue:

I turned to speak to God  
About the world's despair;  
But to make bad matters worse  
I found God wasn't there.

God turned to speak to me  
(Don't anybody laugh)  
God found I wasn't there--  
At least not over half.<sup>6</sup>

Each individual has his own unique relationship to God, and it is his duty to maintain it in its finest form, always trying to discover exactly what that form may signify.

When man first begins to think about it, his thoughts are short and explain only a wee portion of the

<sup>5</sup>Frost, "Snow", Ibid p.183

<sup>6</sup>Frost, "Not All There", Ibid p.408-9





mystery. As he advances in the realms of thought, his conclusions take in larger and larger areas. One of his first deductions is the one mentioned above (the unique, individual relation of each man to God), and it solaces him in his loneliness:

Word I was in the house alone  
 Somehow must have gotten abroad,  
 Word I was in my life alone,  
 Word I had no one left but God.<sup>7</sup>

But if one stops in his thinking about God at any of the way-stations, his impression of God may differ from that of other people's because of its limited scope, much as the elephant appeared different to those who approached it from different angles. This uniqueness of each man's experience must be supplemented by Reason.

Innumerable human experiences with the Deity may be analyzed in the hope of finding the link that can unite man and God. Actual experience is undeniable. Reason is well-based when it starts there; when it does not, it is handicapped. As Helmholtz said: "The Critique of Pure Reason is a continual sermon against the use of the category of thought beyond the limits of actual experience." This may be one explanation why Frost has delayed until his later years making deductions from his experience;

<sup>7</sup>Frost, "Bereft" Ibid p.317



perhaps he wished to be sure that he possessed sufficient experience before he started using it for a spring-board of reason.

What has his reason discovered for him in this case? Namely, that there is Design in life. His reason does not allow him to call it God immediately, but its functions are the maintenance of order in the universe. His sonnet presents evidence of it:

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,  
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth  
Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth--  
Assorted characters of death and blight  
Mixed ready to begin the morning right,  
Like the ingredients of a witches' broth--  
A snow-drop spider, a flower like froth,  
And dead wings carried like a paper kite.

What had that flower to do with being white,  
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?  
What brought the kindred spider to that height,  
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?  
What but design of darkness to appall?--  
If design govern in a thing so small.<sup>8</sup>

Every experience points to large interrelations between the seasons and the crops, life and death, change and permanence. The significance of these relationships is not completely comprehensible by reason. Reason can indicate that Design is present, but is not capable of revealing more. Frost doubts if it would be a good thing if reason were more powerful:

<sup>8</sup>Frost, "Design", Ibid p.396



You and I  
 Would be afraid if we should comprehend  
 And get outside too much bad statistics  
 Our muscles never could again contract:  
 We never could recover human shape,  
 But must live lives out mentally agape,  
 Or die of philosophical distension.<sup>9</sup>

Intrinsically, humanity is not equipped to understand all of life and its ramifications. Finite mind cannot comfortably encompass infinity. As Frost observes,

"Something must be left to God." <sup>10</sup>

Robert Coffin thinks that this attitude of Frost's is his strength; that this is what keeps Frost sweet and sane. This arrangement of responsibility, leaving to God that which is His, and only assuming his own legitimate share, makes Frost a well-adjusted person:

There is this sense of prearranged pattern in things back of Frost's poems...It is second nature with this poet, not second sight....Without the necessity of fear of the hereafter, or any hint of damnation, without a hierarchy of deity, this mysticism amounts to a natural good feeling about creation.<sup>11</sup>

This attitude of Frost's saves him from cynicism, boredom, atheism and other points of view that never seem to bring satisfaction to their owners.

He has advanced as far as possible with reason. His next steps are guided by faith. This, too, is rooted in experience:

<sup>9</sup>Frost, "The Lesson for Today" Ibid p.447

<sup>10</sup>Frost, "Good-Bye and Keep Cold", Ibid p.281

<sup>11</sup>Coffin, op.cit. p.125





The groundwork of all faith is human woe.<sup>12</sup>

As Lincoln was driven often to his knees because there was no other place for him to go, so does man often rediscover God's interest in him. In "Sitting by a Bush in Broad Sunlight", quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Frost traces the evolution of man's faith back to Moses and the Burning Bush. God spoke to man then directly. This single Personal contact is yet preserved to man in the form of his faith.

What is the effect of such faith on a man's daily life? Frost finds it gives meaning to his daily toil. It dignifies him. By fulfilling his part of faith, he provides God with all that is necessary for God to procure His all-wise ends. This trusting faith is described thus:

For this is love and nothing else is love,  
The which it is reserved for God above  
To sanctify to what far ends He will,  
But which it only needs that we fulfil.<sup>13</sup>

Frost wrote this upon experiencing the beauty of the Spring-time. The flowers, the blossoming orchards, the bees and darting birds inspired him to perceiving his part in the world. Robert P. T. Coffin thinks that these simple manifestations of God motivate him thus:

<sup>12</sup>Frost, "The Lesson For Today", Ibid, p.447

<sup>13</sup>Frost, "A Prayer in Spring", Ibid, p.17



Frost believes in little wholes that add up to great wholesomeness. His poems are often small parcels of little goods, at first sight; but they total up to very massive precepts....a great part of Frost's greatness is greatness of heart..<sup>14</sup>

He has accumulated little convictions here and there, which together mean that there is Design in the universe and that he is part of that Design, but faith and reason can take him no farther. Beyond is more, but he has not yet penetrated the ultimate mysteries.

He knows that there is more to learn, and it fascinates him. In his most recent publication, he worries about it. He thinks he has done all that is within human power to fathom the mystery, and that heaven is the stumbling block:

Heaven gives its glimpses only to those  
Not in a position to look too close.<sup>15</sup>

The rest is God's responsibility. This poet believes that, in all fairness, God should speak and explain himself.<sup>16</sup> Otherwise, the game is stale-mated.

If God remains uncommunicative, the only way to break the deadlock is to force Him to unlock His lips, else eternal ignorance will reign. This, to put it over-simply, is what Frost essays to do in his play, "A Masque of Reason".

<sup>14</sup>Coffin, op.cit. p.144

<sup>15</sup>Frost, "A Passing Glimpse" Ibid p.311

<sup>16</sup>Frost, "Revelation", Ibid p.27



With his masterly pen, he assembles God, the Devil, and Job and his wife near the famous Burning Bush to discuss God's ways to man. This twenty-three page drama packs more real wisdom into its blank-verse pages than any other contemporary consideration of this eternal mystery of God and man. Many find "A Masque of Reason" his masterpiece, which it may well be. Certainly, it is compassionately wise, well written and wittily developed.

Since this paper is primarily concerned with Frost's thought, only brief attention need be paid to the setting or the action of the play. Job and his wife are resting in the desert when God appears to them in the Burning Bush, and then in Person, pitching throne by their atoll. Job rather thinks it's Judgment Day. Frost having brought the two together devotes the rest of his attention to a sort of question and answer period. Job's wife provides the necessary light touch to keep the occasion from being over -solemn, as when she exclaims:

It's God.

I'd know Him by Blake's picture anywhere.<sup>17</sup>

What's Heaven is Job's first inquiry. Is it surcease of pain? Job would like that, since he's had so much on earth. Peace would be enjoyable throughout Eternity.

<sup>17</sup>Frost, "A Masque of Reason" p.2





God does not immediately answer him, and his eventual response is only an evasion. (A subtle bit of characterization by Frost here.) Job's wife adds her queries about Heaven, and excellent they are too:

Perhaps the earth is going to crack someday  
 Like a big egg and hatch a heaven out  
 Of all the dead and buried from their graves.  
 One simple little statement from the throne  
 Would put an end to such fantastic nonsense;  
 .....  
 Job says there's no such thing as Earth's becoming  
 An easier place for man to save his soul in.  
 Except as a hard place to save his soul in,  
 A trial ground where he can try himself  
 And find out whether he is any good,  
 It would be meaningless. It might as well  
 Be Heaven at once and have it over with.<sup>18</sup>

This idea of Job's that the earth is a difficult place in which to save one's soul was also expressed by Frost in "The Lesson for Today." Note the similarity in the two passages:

Earth's a hard place in which to save the soul  
 And could it be brought under state control,  
 So automatically we all were saved,  
 Its separateness from Heaven could be waived;  
 It might as well at once be kingdom-come.  
 (Perhaps it will be next millennium)<sup>19</sup>

Both Job and Frost are agreed that world is not heavenly. To think of earth as a testing ground is a courageous point of view. In such a case, one would ask no quarter of Fortune, knowing that the final balance would be just, regardless of

<sup>18</sup>Frost, A Masque of Reason, p.16



the score in this world. If one played the game hard and true, victory or loss would be unimportant. If one's soul possessed quality, he need only hold the fort until tempered by battle as steel is by fire. The element of chance is insignificant. Power, position, self become secondary. The main consideration would be: did you so conduct yourself on earth that you saved your soul? Surely, this is the way that a just God would operate. Furthermore, he would indicate this to His people.

As Job's wife said, one simple little statement from God would clarify the entire issue. Theologians believe that God's sending of Christ into the world, and the Son's death upon the Cross and the subsequent resurrection were the Word. Frost never refers to this. All his references to Divinity are addressed to God the Father. Naturally, in "A Masque of Reason", the Old Testament background had to be used. Nevertheless, in no other writing does he seem to accept the New Testament doctrines. Possibly his censor, reason, will not allow him to give credence to that which his personal experience cannot substantiate.

Job asks God another question which God does answer, but the results in both cases are almost identical, for he finds them equally puzzling. Naturally, Job wants to

<sup>19</sup>Frost, "The Lesson for Today", Collected Poems of Robert Frost, p.449



know why he had to suffer so many torments. Had he deserved them? Did he by any action of his own bring that punishment on his head? God tells him:

There's no connection man can reason out  
Between his just deserts and what he gets.  
Virtue may fail and wickedness succeed.<sup>20</sup>

Frost develops this point in great detail. No one lives long in this world without coming to precisely this conclusion. Frost's own experience is a good case in point. The poverty in which he had to raise his family was not just recompense for his creative labors. Some man in New York who did nothing but clip coupons had a much less painful existence meted out to him. You may be sure that Frost heartily agrees that there is injustice in this world.

The capricious reasons which the poet assigns to God are amazing. Job had to be an unknowing part of the whole procedure, whose aim was to give God free will. Before Job's ordeal, God had to reward the good, and punish the evil. Since He faithfully did this, He had no way of knowing whether his worshippers followed Him for selfish reasons or for love. Because it was foreordained that good would prosper and evil wither, God had no choice in His rulings. He was definitely circumscribed. Job was an

<sup>20</sup>Frost, The Masque of Reason, p.4





object lesson to His subjects that the Lord would treat His servants as He wished, prospering evil, and prostrating good if He so desired. Only in this manner, could He really be all powerful. Granted the premises, the conclusions are logical.

The title of the drama now is explained. God is unreasonable, and only wears a mask of it for reason-hungry mortals to try to penetrate. Humans ask:

I should like to know the reason why.

God replies:

There you go asking for the very thing  
We've just agreed I didn't have to give.<sup>21</sup>

There is no reason for injustice beyond God's flat statement that there just is injustice. Nothing further is to be said on the subject, God thinks.

Reason-hungry mortals think otherwise. An agreement is between two contracting parties. When did man ever agree that he would forfeit reason:

You thought it was agreed You needn't give them.  
You thought to suit Yourself. I've not agreed  
To anything with anyone.<sup>22</sup>

Analysis so far has led Frost to believe that the whole man-God proposition is erroneous from its very inception, if God maintains that it was an agreement that forced reason out of the arrangement.

<sup>21</sup>Frost, The Masque of Reason, p.6, 7

<sup>22</sup>Frost, The Masque of Reason, p.8



God counters that it was for man's own good that merits and punishments should not always be bestowed in the same unchanging manner. Job helped God realize this. They

Found out the discipline man needed most  
Was to learn his submission to unreason;  
And that for man's own sake as well as mine,  
So he won't find it hard to take his orders  
From his inferiors in intelligence  
In peace and war---especially in war.  
So he won't find it hard to take his war.<sup>23</sup>

The irony about the war is particularly timely. So far, God has established his position that he is not bound by moral laws and is answerable to no one. This is a fairly popular picture of God in many theological circles.

Job, as Frost's spokesman, is unwilling to rest on such unsatisfying grounds. Somewhere in Divinity must be sentient Design. Man has enough reason within himself to joy in recognizing its patterns expressed in the Universe. Then, truly, God must have reason, too, even if He will not deign to reveal it to human beings. Job is a privileged character. Therefore, he dares to ask God for the truth of the situation. As Job sees it:

We disparage reason.  
But all the time it's what we're most concerned with.  
There 's will as motor and there's will as brakes.  
Reason is , I suppose, the steering gear.  
.....  
Because I let You off  
From telling me Your reason , d\_on't assume

<sup>23</sup>Frost, The Masque of Reason, p.12



I thought You had none.....  
 If you'll forgive me the irreverence,  
 It sounds to me as if You thought it out,  
 And took your time to it. It seems to me  
 An afterthought, a long long afterthought.  
 I'd give more for one least beforehand reason  
 Than all the justifying ex-post-facto  
 Excuses trumped up by You for theologists.<sup>24</sup>

God will not give Job the underlying reasons for His Design,  
 and Job is left as unsatisfied as ever. He tries once more  
 to elicit the vital information:

You could end this by simply coming out  
 And saying plainly and unequivocally  
 Whether there's any part of man immortal.  
 Yet You don't speak. Let fools bemuse themselves  
 By being baffled for the sake of being.  
 I'm sick of the whole artificial puzzle.<sup>25</sup>

A world of design, the complexities of which cannot be  
 plumbed by reason is man's portion. Whether his soul is  
 immortal or not is a mystery. At this point, the line is  
 drawn beyond which mortal man cannot go.

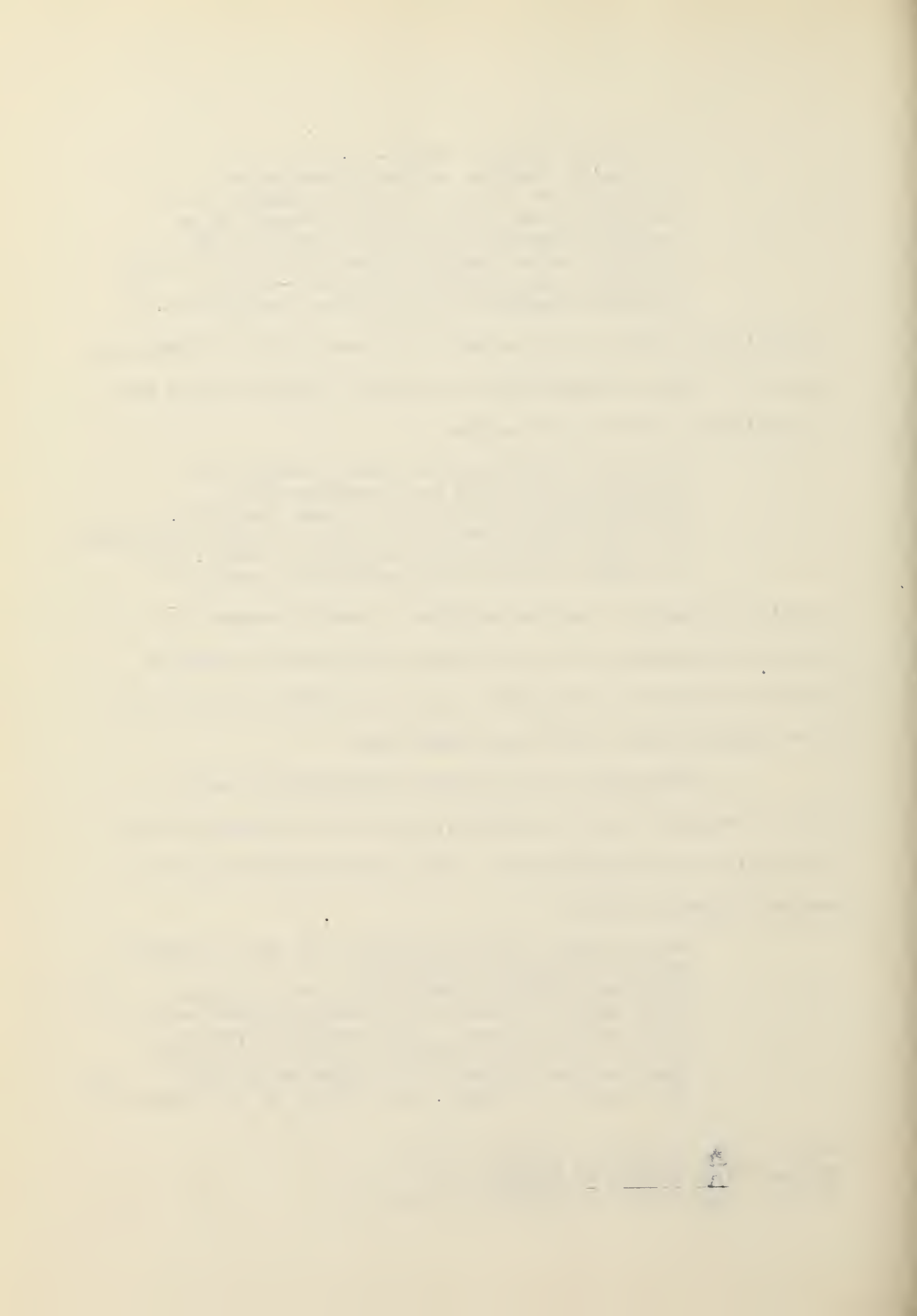
Philosophers may think they find by devious  
 routes insights into the problem, but Frost discounts this  
 information as insignificant. His scorn is for those who  
 parade "hidden values":

The chances are when there's so much pretense  
 Of metaphysical profundity  
 The obscurity's a fraud to cover nothing.  
 I've come to think no so-called hidden value's  
 Worth going after. Get down into things  
 It will be found there's no more given there  
 Than on the surface. If there ever was,  
 The crypt was long since rifled by the Greeks.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Frost, A Masque of Reason, p.13

<sup>25</sup>Frost, A Masque of Reason, p.15

<sup>26</sup>Frost, A Masque of Reason, pp.14-15





The conclusion that Frost arrives at is a sobering one. The exact character of the relationship between God and man cannot be defined by reason. Back in 1924, Bruce W. Weirick wrote:

The dominant note is tired futility . . .  
There is indeed, beauty in life, and in  
nature, but under the beauty is death, and  
rounding life and its urges, futility.<sup>27</sup>

The enigma of life that Frost has faced becomes the main flavor to permeate Mr. Weirick's consciousness. The latter is unfair in attributing to Frost his own reaction about the insolubility of life's many problems. He further misunderstands the poet by writing about Frost:

He has no mystical sense. When he inquires  
deeply..what we get is...blank frenzy.<sup>28</sup>

This evaluation of Frost's honesty in admitting that he is not omniscient seems unconsidered on Mr. Weirick's part. In the passing years, Frost has written much poetry based on his humble admission of limited knowledge that merits another description than "blank frenzy". "The Lesson for Today" is so fraught with meaning that if it has any faults, it is bent too much toward didacticism. It is anything but "blank".

"Futility" is a charge that may also be refuted.

If the meaning of "futility" is "useless", then its opposite must be "useful". His poems abound in inspiration. His

<sup>27</sup>Weirick, From Whitman to Sandburg in American Poetry, p.182

<sup>28</sup>Weirick, From Whitman to Sandburg in American Poetry, p.184



confidence in the ability of man to fulfill his part in the universal design of creation never falters. What he does know, he affirms forcefully. What he does not say, critics have no right to condemn. To some economists, "Build Soil" recommends a "futile" way of life. To Frost it is the only possible useful way of life. He is no pragmatist.

If the relationship between God and man cannot be reduced to a simple, comprehensible one, Frost does not give up with a sense of futility. When he said:

the utmost reward  
of daring should still be to dare.<sup>29</sup>

he meant it in the intellectual realms as well. For him, the reward of searching is still to search. He may never know certainty in this life, but that will not deter him from constantly investigating every possible clue. Even if he can reach no conclusions, he will have been more worthy of the name of man and will have more adequately prepared his soul for the possible next world than if he admitted defeat here. He cannot claim a victory because God has not shown him that man's soul is immortal. Without that assurance, he must constantly watch and wait.

There may be little or much beyond the grave.  
But the strong are saying nothing until they see.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup>Frost. "The Trial by Existence" Ibid p.28

<sup>30</sup>Frost. "The Strong Are Saying Nothing", Ibid p.391



How much has Frost been able to see? Just that universal Design seems to govern life, including him. Form outweighs chaos:

Let chaos storm!  
Let cloud shapes swarm!  
I wait for form.<sup>31</sup>

By reasoning about his own experiences, he has deduced this fact of Design. For instance:

A bird half wakened in the lunar noon  
Sang half way through its little inborn tune.  
Partly because it sang but once all night  
And that from no especial bush's height;  
Partly because it sang ventriloquist  
And had the inspiration to desist  
Almost before the prick of hostile ears,  
It ventured less in peril than appears.  
It could not have come down to us so far  
Through the interstices of things ajar  
On the long bead chain of repeated birth  
To be a bird while we are men on earth  
If singing out of sleep and dream that way  
Had made it much more easily a prey.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps, being part of a universal pattern is not startling philosophy. It's as simple as rain. Those who want scintillating mental displays will have to go elsewhere. It may be that this simplicity fills a need. Howard Mumford Jones has recently written:

We need...a passionate belief in the values  
and in a way of life some centuries old...  
We...long for an affirmation, even if it  
concerns only the simple things. <sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup>Frost, "Pertinax", Ibid p.408

<sup>32</sup>Frost, "On a Bird Singing in Its Sleep", I bid, p.397

<sup>33</sup>Jones, Ideas in America p.222.





This simplicity of Frost's, because of its basis in truth, is one of his finest characteristics. There is probably more true religion in this simplicity than in many elaborate creeds.



## THE CORRELATION OF FROST'S THOUGHT

We make ourselves a place apart  
 Behind light words that tease and flout  
 But oh, the agitated heart  
 Till someone find us really out. <sup>1</sup>

Robert Frost has been waiting for his public to discover the true meaning of his poetry. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he is well aware of the concomitant stream of significance that flows beneath the simple experiences he so masterfully records. His fear of blunting his artistry by emphasizing the abstract principles submerged in his verse restrains him from charting these depths for those who look "neither out far nor in deep".<sup>2</sup>

What do these superficial readers of his poetry see? Simply black and white pictures of rural life. Lovely nature studies. Interesting tales of witches and maladjusted bumpkins. Morbid failures. Sacrilegious characterizations of God. Albert Feuillerat finds only plain facts. This poet, he writes, "knows the plentitude of physical life ...He is naive, spontaneous, non-intellectual."<sup>3</sup> As Louis Untermeyer has observed, "A more understanding consideration of Frost's poetry would have instructed the critics." <sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Frost, "Revelation", Collected Poems of Robert Frost, p.27

<sup>2</sup>Frost, "Neither far out nor in Deep", Ibid. p. 394

<sup>3</sup>Feuillerat, Revue des Deux Mondes, Series 7, Vol.17, p.185

<sup>4</sup>Untermeyer, Modern American Poetry, p. 211

Published by the American Medical Association, 535 North Dearborn Street, Chicago, Ill.  
Subscription price, \$5.00 per annum in advance. Single copies, 15 cents.  
Entered as Second-Class Matter, October 3, 1917, Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under  
Post Office No. 384, with special permission of the Post Office Department.  
Acceptance for mailing at special rate of postage provided for in Act of October  
3, 1917, authorized on July 1, 1918.

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What do those who see below the surface find? Such critics as John Drinkwater, Henry Seidel Canby, and William Rose Benet discover "the profoundest meanings."<sup>5</sup> Untermeyer, who follows his own advice in carefully reading Frost's poetry concludes:

He cannot suggest a character or a countryside without informing the subject with his own philosophy, a philosophy whose bantering accents cannot hide a moral earnestness.... Such poetry, with its genius for suggestive understatement, establishes Frost among the first of contemporary writers and places him with the very best of American poets past or present."<sup>6</sup>

Truly, Frost means more than he actually says; this is the secret of his genius.

His technique is to plunge "in media res". His messages seem, at first sight, to have no beginning nor ending.<sup>7</sup> That, however, is the way he has found life itself to be:

You're searching, Joe  
For things that don't exist; I mean beginnings.  
Ends and beginnings -- there are no such things.  
There are only middles.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, we see that Frost himself never intended to present more than the vivid living moment, caught by his perceptive lenses. If close study reveals more than was

<sup>5</sup>Drinkwater et.al., Twentieth Century Poetry, p. 327

<sup>6</sup>Untermeyer, op.cit. p. 211

<sup>7</sup>Cox, op.cit. p. 109

<sup>8</sup>Frost, "In the Home Stretch", Collected Poems of Robert Frost, p. 145





immediately apparent, that, too, is a part of living. This simple aim of his has been very sympathetically presented by Mr. Lambuth:

He must use that which he himself has lived in and through, and because his mind does not live in abstractions but in reality, he has not attempted to extract the essence from the event and give it to us disembodied. He has caught in his net of words the whole of a living experience, clothed it in its mere accidentals of time and place.<sup>9</sup>

Since this was Frost's aim, he should be judged in conjunction with it. "Living experience" is presented for the public to view through the poet's eyes. No critic has ever condemned him for lack of convincing vitality.

Why not leave the criticism of Frost at this point, without delving further into his deeper meanings? Simply because that would mean losing the better part of his poetry. People are so constituted that only a few can gain wisdom by intuitive flashes. The majority of their information must come to them in stylized, simplified abstractions. Otherwise, thinking becomes confused with too many distracting details. That is the reason for this investigation. What Robert Frost was able to "catch in his net of words" from the stream of life, this writer must weigh and catalog and systematize. Then the many

<sup>9</sup>Lambuth, ~~Foreword~~ to Robert Frost: A Bibliography. .



brilliant facets of the poet's illuminating spirit will be concentrated into that which lesser mortals can comprehend. Perhaps it is a pedestrian undertaking; but it is better to walk to Parnassus than never to arrive at all.

The present detailed study of Frost's poetry has revealed that his ideal man is an individualist, who meets life unflinchingly. Nature fortifies him with beauty and strength. Society in its looser types of organization provides necessary human companionship. Both reason and emotion are used as impartial guides to Truth. The evident Design of the Universe is a manifestation of a not completely comprehensible God. These abstractions are valuable because they reveal the main current of his thought. True, there are counter-eddies here and there, but in the main they are not significant. One could not make the above statement, unless all the tendencies had been catalogued according to their importance. Truth resides in the essence of many experiences, not in the single occasion:

The experiences which lie behind the poetry of Robert Frost are not those of the superficial event or contemporary idea. They rise from that deeper level where man engages in the unending struggle to adjust spirit to the world and the world to spirit. <sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.



The eternal Truth which Frost expresses is universal. All men search for it, and glory in vicarious achievement when an artist puts into words those principles which clarify and ennoble life.

A German critic, Karl Schwarz, enthusiastically calls Frost "one of the great poets of our day". More than that, Schwarz has responded to the meanings imbedded in the verse for the perspicacious:

Human life with all its everyday and human emotions, nature and the universe, the circular course of all things -- all are so enveloped in a unity of living that the one finally becomes the expression of the other. A great unity, enclosing the world and life, is back of it, a God conceived, but not described; no sum of codified restrictions and moral precepts, but a free proud life in this world, among these people, on this small spot of earth, and through them bound with the eternity of life.<sup>11</sup>

While, on the one hand, it is gratifying to have a foreign scholar appreciate the magnificence of Frost's simplicity, it is doubly irritating to find complete misunderstanding in fellow-Americans. Truth may be universal, but so also is half-truth, unfortunately.

An article by Isidor Schneider in The Nation is the peak of the "misunderstanding" of Frost. Mr. Schneider's intention is to point out the limiting elements of Frost's

<sup>11</sup>Schwarz, Hochschule und Ausland, Vol.13:3





poetry, which is all right for "diversion and relief... but not for illumination." If anyone ever needed illumination, it is Schneider. He continues, concerning Frost's understanding of life:

When he essays to speak of it, as in the long poem New Hampshire (one of the poorest in the book and a sort of pudding of irrevelancies), he shows a surprising lack of comprehension. There, to the challenge of contemporary ideas, he replies with know-nothing arrogance.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, this is a case of the mote in the neighbor's eye, and the beam in one's own. Blissfully unaware of his asininity, Schneider delivers this opinion:

In fact, Mr. Frost's work is weakest in ideas. His style is gnomic; it sounds impressively thoughtful and many sentences have the rounded conclusiveness of proverbs. But his thought, disengaged from his style, is often discovered to be no thought at all, or a banality.<sup>12</sup>

Nor is this the ultimate depths to which Mr. Schneider consigns one of the greatest living American poets; the final insult is:

Mr. Frost has casual ambitions to be a philosopher in his poetry; and in these strivings, he is not successful.<sup>12</sup>

Mr. Schneider is evidently one who should not have pearls cast before him. He is handicapped by inability to understand that which is not printed in bill-board letters

<sup>12</sup>Schneider, "Robert Frost", Nation, Vol.CXXXII, p. 101



for his edification.

This disparagement of Frost is not the dominant note in contemporary criticism, but it is a recurrent one. Its insistence necessitates attention. When a critic presents "The Case Against Mr. Frost"<sup>13</sup> the complete evidence for judgment should be available. An analysis of Frost's philosophy, based on impartial readings of his poems with particular attention to the implied nuances, is indicated. Lawrance Thompson realized this, and his book<sup>14</sup> is the first of the scholarly treatments that Frost genuinely deserves. Because he did not include the systemization of Frost's inspired insights in his Fire and Ice, as one of the major developments of his theme, that area was chosen for study in this dissertation.

Wherein lies this genius? Early and late it has been proclaimed. William Dean Howells was one of the first to recognize it. Decades later, the same observations were echoed by Van Wyck Brooks:

Robert Frost revived, for a new generation  
the part of poet-seer of Emerson's day.<sup>14</sup>

Like Emerson's ideal American, Frost has been a Man Thinking. The instruments of his instruction have been

<sup>13</sup>Cowley, "The Case Against Mr. Frost", New Republic, Sept., 1944. p. 345

<sup>14</sup>Brooks, New England: Indian Summer 1865-1915. p. 530



nature, books, and action. From nature, he has properly learned the laws of the universe are those that govern human life as well. He has lived intimately with nature, and she has revealed universal design to him.

From books, he has gleaned all that would reconcile itself with his own observations. At school in Lawrence, a passage from Virgil's Georgics suddenly made him understand what it was to be a poet. It was his desire to read the classics that decided him to return to Harvard for those two years. When he had absorbed that which he wanted to know, he left.<sup>15</sup> He realized the truth of Emerson's statement, "The office of books is ~~is~~ not to create bookworms, but independent souls."

The purpose of his farming has been, among other things, to translate his intellect into character. Independence of thought and action characterize him. As Emerson commanded, Frost walks on his own feet, works with his own hands, and speaks his own mind. If this is singularly like the Sage of Concord, that is because in Frost, the wisdom of New England has had a rebirth.

In him, the region was born again, -- it seemed never to have lost its morning vigor and freshness.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> DeVoto, "The Maturity of American Literature", The Saturday Review of Literature, 20th Anniversary Edition, p. 14

<sup>16</sup> Brooks, op.cit. p. 542





- Time Magazine thinks "Frost resembles nobody but himself".<sup>17</sup>

However, this may be refuted by the following quotation from Emerson, written more than a hundred years ago, which expresses exactly Frost's twentieth-century point of view:

I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art or Provencal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into today, and you may have the antique and future worlds.<sup>18</sup>

Emerson and Frost have many important differences, but in one way they are alike: they both perceive the harmonies that are in soul and matter.

Lin Yutang sees no reason for the existence of poetry, unless it endows man with a more vital sense of life. Robert Coffin agrees:

When laws and languages fail, poets ~~poets~~ must step in and create new. For it is to them the nations have always looked for designs in living. Poets must teach men to admire and worship life anew...Of all alive, they must be most intent on living.<sup>19</sup>

It is because Robert Frost is a magnificent human being in the finest sense of the word, that he is so soul-stirring as a poet. He has learned the rules of life on this planet and has communicated his wisdom

<sup>17</sup> Time, Vol.XXXIII, No.20. p.86

<sup>18</sup> Emerson, Phi Beta Kappa Lecture, "The American Scholar", p.60

<sup>19</sup> Coffin, op.cit. p. 108



through his poetry. As Plautus said, "Not by years, but by disposition is wisdom acquired." This generation has been blessed to have such a guide vouchsafed to it. It would be unfortunate if the true meaning of his message were not appreciated. Time and study will increase his fame among men who seek the truth. Wilfred Gibson has already poetically expressed a small portion of the tribute due Frost as a thinker and poet:

Do you remember the still summer evening  
 When in the cozy cream-washed living-room  
 Of the Old Nail-shop we all talked and laughed --  
 Our neighbors from the Gallows, Catherine  
 and Lascelles Abercrombie; Rupert Brooke;  
 Elinor and Robert Frost, living a while  
 At Little Iddens, who'd brought over with them  
 Helen and Edward Thomas? In the lamplight  
 We talked and laughed, but for the most part  
                   listened  
 While Robert Frost kept on and on and on  
 In his slow New England fashion for our delight,  
 Holding us with shrewd turns and racy quips,  
 And the rare twinkle of his grave blue eyes.

We sat there in the lamplight while the day  
 Died from rose-latticed casements, and the plovers  
 Called over the low meadows till the owls  
 Answered them from the elms; we sat and talked --  
 Now a quick flash from Abercrombie, now  
 A murmured dry half-heard aside from Thomas,  
 Now a clear laughing word from Brooke, and then  
 Again Frost's rich and ripe philosophy  
 That had the body and tang of good draught-cider  
 And poured as clear a stream.

.....  
 .....



Was it for nothing that the little room  
 All golden in the lamplight thrilled with golden  
 Laughter from hearts of friends that summer night?

.....

.....whenever men and women gather  
 For talk and laughter on a summer night,  
 Shall not that lamp rekindle, and the room  
 Glow once again alive with light and laughter,  
 And like a singing star in time's abyss  
 Burn golden hearted through oblivion? 20





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1925.





THE THOUGHT IN ROBERT FROST'S POETRY

Abstract of a Dissertation

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requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Robert Frost's poetry has won four Pulitzer Prizes. The philosophy of life which he has evolved in his seventy-one years of experience is widely acclaimed. Nonetheless, his canny wisdom is so subtly expressed in his poetry that an insensitive reader may overlook its presence. Frost's fear of blunting his artistry has restrained him from charting in his poems the depths of thought that flow beneath the surface. Not only has he wisely refrained from pointing out his deeper meanings, but his artistic soul has rebelled against his recording his thoughts in any other form of writing. The aim of this dissertation is, therefore, the organization of Frost's thought into his philosophy of life.

Such an arrangement of his thought should simplify future evaluations of him. Subsequent analyses can deal with well-defined and separate aspects. By clearing away the fascinating, but distracting, poetical details, the thoughts of Frost have been here translated into abstractions. Since, for the sake of brevity, the major portion of scholastic knowledge has to be transmitted in the form of simplified abstractions, this study is designed as an aid to future criticism. That a detailed systematization was needed is attested by the superficiality of the criticism which this poet has received in the past twenty years. Indiscriminate praise has been his usual lot. Not until 1942 was the first genuinely scholarly



investigation published. The present dissertation proceeds from that foundation to a detailed analysis of the poet's thought.

It has been arbitrarily divided into six sections: (I) Man; (II) Man and Nature; (III) Man and Society; (IV) Man and Reason; (V) Man and Emotion; (VI) Man and God. The individual findings have been correlated in the final summary.

To Frost, Man is of primary importance. His worth is enhanced when he possesses the qualities which seem particularly essential to Frost for strong character: individuality, self-reliance, friendliness, ingenuity, tenacity, and sensitivity. Innumerable poems celebrate these admirable virtues.

The relationship which exists between Man and Nature is well-defined by Frost. He finds that Nature is the background for Man's activities. As separate entities, they constantly interact with one another. Nature is challenging as an antagonist; benevolent as a provider; stimulating as a preceptor; but her beauty is that which binds Man to her most strongly. Frost's point of view places Man on that plane of life which lies above Nature and below God.

Man has more difficulty in adjusting himself to Society than to Nature. The complexities of group life interest Frost and he delights in observing the many variations that can be made on the basic pattern of family, friends, school, church, and state. Many critics insist that his Society is regional, but he has emphatically denied it in





both New Hampshire and A Further Range. He is correct when he asserts that his attitude is world-embracing. Writing his poems in New Hampshire does not necessarily restrict them to the White Mountains.

Good community relationships must be based on individual free will and initiative. Great impersonal panaceas, fathered by the government, lack this essential. The best relationship is that in which the individual is self-directed. Personal worth is the only basis for a good Society. Frost declares that a union of worthless people is necessarily dross. Man should refrain from organizing until each potential member has developed his own resources to a significant point. Frost likens human cultivation to soil cultivation. Persistent self-improvement, without regard for economic betterment in the process, is the contribution that should be the required admission fee for membership in organized society. Man should keep himself separate until he has achieved the optimum development of his talents.

In the tantalizing search for Truth, Man finds Reason an excellent guide. Frost consistently<sup>t</sup> uses it as a touchstone for evaluating experience. In this manner, he has tested the philosophies which have dominated the centuries. Reason restrains him from accepting completely either idealism or materialism. To Frost, the courage required to admit that one has not quite grasped Truth is of finer quality than the audacity which leaps over reasonable doubts to a desired



conclusion. Having encountered what he calls the Secret at the heart of life, Frost admits the inadequacy of his understanding.

Personal integrity forces him into the position of dualism, where he denies neither his sense experiences nor his intuition of an extra-sensory world. For him, both seen and unseen realities have validity. His partial acceptance and partial rejection of both materialism and idealism is the middle-of-the-road choice to which Reason has led him. The Golden Mean governs all his activities. It keeps him from being either an optimist or a pessimist. His reasoned skepticism causes him to advocate unflinching acceptance of the pre-ordained limits of Man's knowledge.

Emotion is as important an element in Frost's scheme of life as Reason. For his own part, they are equals. When he applies the Golden Mean to Emotion, he discovers that joy and sorrow combine to produce a world of compensations. His observations lead him to believe that there is a definite pattern of destiny, which is always prejudiced just a little in favor of Man's happiness, rather than his woe. The main factor in human happiness is Love, which is necessary to make life satisfying. Frost not only gives Love and Reason prominent positions in his philosophy, but he further declares that Love is a dependable pathway to Truth.

Man and God and their relationship have intrigued Frost for many years. His conclusions have been slowly and



cautiously deduced. By a combination of actual experience and reasoning, he has discovered that there is Design in life. His Reason does not allow him to call it God immediately; although its functions are the maintenance of order. Man has enough Reason in himself to recognize its patterns when expressed in the universe. Frost is convinced that he, therefore, is part of that Design.

He also knows that earth is a hard place in which to save one's soul. But whether the soul is immortal or not is a mystery. The answer to ~~that~~ would have to come from God. Since Frost does not think that God has yet clarified this issue, a Secret exists at the heart of life.

The present detailed study of Frost's poetry has revealed that his ideal ~~Man~~ is an individualist, who meets life unflinchingly. Nature fortified him with beauty and strength. Society provides necessary human companionship. Both Reason and Emotion are used as impartial guides to Truth. The evident Design of the universe is probably the manifestation of a not completely comprehensible God.

These abstractions reveal the main currents of Robert Frost's thought. The Truth which he expresses is universal. All men search for it and glory in vicarious achievement when anyone manages to express those principles which clarify and ennoble life. Frost has communicated his wisdom through his poetry.





## AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The tiny village of South Yarmouth on salty Cape Cod was the birthplace of this New Englander, November 15, 1919. My father, Samuel Andrew Livingstone, was then serving as pastor of the local Methodist church, while studying at Boston University School of Theology. My mother, Goldie Dierking Livingstone, early undertook my education, transmitting to me an undying love of the arts.

My life has been chiefly academic. My elementary, junior and senior high school education was entirely in the schools of Rhode Island. In 1940, I was graduated with honor from Rhode Island State College, Kingston, R. I. I received a scholarship from the University of Cincinnati where I obtained my Master of Arts degree in 1941. In 1942, I received my Bachelor of Education degree from R.I. College of Education, Providence, R.I. During the school year 1942-43, I taught English at the Gorton High School, Warwick, R.I.

In September, 1943, I enrolled in Boston University Graduate School, where I am a candidate for the Ph.D. degree. My husband, Wesley F. Roberts, is a student at Boston University Medical School. The year 1947 should see us both graduated from the same Alma Mater.













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